Philosophical Perspectives on Suicide

Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein

Paolo Stellino

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Paolo Stellino
Nova Institute of Philosophy, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, LISBOA, Portugal

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Preface

According to Baruch Spinoza, “a free person thinks about death less than anything, and his wisdom is a meditation not on death but on life” (*Ethics*, IV, 67). Writing a book on the philosophy of suicide does not necessarily mean to meditate on death. This is what I tried to explain—often with no success—to all those friends and colleagues that in recent years kept asking me why I had chosen to work on such a gloomy subject. Of course, I could have reminded them of Camus’ well-known opening words of *The Myth of Sisyphus*: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide.” But the fact is that whereas I am not persuaded by Camus’ claim, I am truly convinced that meditating on suicide means, to a great extent, meditating on fundamental questions that directly concern life, not death. Among others, these questions are: How do we conceive our obligations to society, friends, and family? Which is the set of moral values according to which we choose to orientate our life? Which is the value that we give to our autonomy and freedom? Is this value non-negotiable? And how do we conceive dignity? Is it a “property” that, in specific situations, can be undermined or deteriorated?

I began to take interest in these questions almost fifteen years ago when, almost accidentally, I attended a session of the seminar of the Bioethics Research Group of the University of Valencia. At the time, I was still a PhD student and the subject of my dissertation (on Nietzsche and Dostoevsky) had little to do with bioethics. Juan Carlos Siurana Aparisi, the director of the research group, drew my attention to the fact that Nietzsche’s stance on suicide was almost unexplored by bioethicists. I began looking for Nietzsche’s remarks on suicide in his writings and posthumous fragments. What struck me immediately was Nietzsche’s joyous and almost poetical conception of free death. The possibility of conceiving death *differently*, that is, as a festival was something new for me.

I left Spain in 2010. At the time, I had two main concerns: to find a post-doc position and to work on the English translation of my dissertation. I temporarily set aside my interest on the topic of suicide and devoted myself completely to Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. It was an international conference on Kant and Nietzsche, held in 2012 in Lisbon, that gave me the occasion to work again on the philosophy of suicide. From that moment, suicide has been, somewhat intermittently, one of my main topics of research. The idea of writing this book occurred to me some years later, when I noticed that there was a *fil rouge* that linked Kant’s, Schopenhauer’s, Nietzsche’s, and Wittgenstein’s views of suicide. I will motivate my choice to place these four philosophical perspectives on suicide side by side in the *Introduction*, so that there is no need to dwell on it here.

Some chapters of this book are based on material previously published in P. Stellino, “Nietzsche on Suicide”, *Nietzsche-Studien*, 42 (2013): 151–177, and in P. Stellino, “Kant and Nietzsche on Suicide”, *Philosophical Inquiry*, 39/2 (2015): 79–104. Although in both cases I heavily reworked their content for this book, I

would like to thank both journals for permission to revise and reuse these publications.

My research particularly benefited from the works of three specialists on the philosophy of suicide: Margaret P. Battin, Héctor Wittwer, and Michael Cholbi. Wittwer's book *Selbsttötung als philosophisches Problem: Über die Rationalität und Moralität des Suizids* particularly helped me at the initial stage of my research to understand the complexities of the different arguments that are put forward in the debate concerning the rationality and morality of suicide.

Paolo Stellino
Lisbon
23 April 2020

Abbreviations

Kant

References to Kant's writings are cited according to the volume and page number of the Academy Edition (*Kants gesammelte Schriften*).

A *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*

CPR *Critique of Pure Reason* [1781 cited as A/1787 cited as B]

CPrR *Critique of Practical Reason*

LE *Lectures on Ethics*

G *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*

MM *The Metaphysics of Morals*

NF *Notes and Fragments*

R *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*

Schopenhauer

References to Schopenhauer's writings are cited according to the following abbreviations and the page number of the editions listed in the bibliography.

BM *On the Basis of Morals*

MR *Manuscript Remains in Four Volumes*

PP (I & II) *Parerga and Paralipomena*

WWR (I & II) *The World as Will and Representation*

Nietzsche

References to Nietzsche's works are cited by abbreviation, chapter (when applicable) and section number. For the sake of brevity, the chapter might be identified only by a key word (for instance, *Clever* instead of *Why I Am so Clever*). Nietzsche's posthumous fragments are cited by year, group, and fragment number according to the standard Colli and Montinari edition. Nietzsche's letters are quoted using the symbol # plus the standard reference number of the letter.

A *The Anti-Christ*

BGE *Beyond Good and Evil*

BT *The Birth of Tragedy*

EH *Ecce Homo*

GM *On the Genealogy of Morality*

GS *The Gay Science*

HH *Human, All Too Human*

HL *On the Use and Disadvantage of History for Life*

L *Letters*

NW *Nietzsche contra Wagner*

PF *Posthumous Fragments*

SE *Schopenhauer as Educator*

TI *Twilight of the Idols*

WS *The Wanderer and His Shadow*

Z *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Wittgenstein

Quotes from the *Tractatus* are cited by reference to the number of the section. Quotes from the *Notebooks* and the *Geheime Tagebücher* are cited by reference to the day of the entry.

CV *Culture and Value*

GT *Geheime Tagebücher. 1914–1916*

LE *Lecture on Ethics*

NB *Notebooks. 1914–1916*

TLP *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

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A part of this book was written during my stay in Montpellier. I would like to thank Pascal Nouvel for welcoming me at the *Centre d'Éthique Contemporaine*. A special thought goes to Nadia El Eter and Guillaume Bagnolini, who shared with me the daily routine at the *Centre*.

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Finally, I am deeply thankful to my family for their constant support, and to Audrey for her love and for sharing her life with me (despite the fact that I am a philosopher). *E lucevan le stelle…*

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About the author

Paolo Stellino
is Researcher at the Nova Institute of Philosophy, New University of Lisbon, Portugal. His main fields of research interest are the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy, ethics, and philosophy of cinema. He has published many articles in international peer-reviewed journals and has authored several book chapters. He is the author of the book *Nietzsche and Dostoevsky: On the Verge of Nihilism* (2015).

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1. Introduction: Bringing Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein Together

Paolo Stellino[1] ✉
(1) Nova Institute of Philosophy, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, LISBOA, Portugal

✉ **Paolo Stellino**
Email: paolo.stellino@fcsh.unl.pt

Keywords Suicide – Aim – Structure – Methodology – Summary

In Ancient Greece death was seen as an exit door that led “from here to yonder”, as Socrates puts in Plato’s *Phaedo* (117c/Plato 1997), that is, from life on earth to the afterlife. One of the key philosophical questions concerning death was whether man had the right to open the door. In an earlier passage from the same dialogue, Socrates explains to Cebes that “we men are in a kind of prison, and that one must not free oneself or run away” (*Phaedo*, 62b)—at least, not “before a god has indicated some necessity to do so” (*Phaedo*, 62c). Some centuries afterwards Epictetus, the Stoic philosopher, expressed a different opinion. Life should be preserved as long as it is beneficial, but if it becomes unbearable, one can give it up. As he writes in a well-known passage from the *Discourses*, “[h]as some one made a smoke in the house? If he has made a moderate amount of smoke I shall stay; if too much, I go outside. For one ought to remember and hold fast to this, that the door stands open” (*Discourses* I, XXV, 18/Epictetus 1956).

Since antiquity, the arguments put forward by philosophers have become more solid and sophisticated. Nevertheless, the main question to be answered remains the same: do we have a right to voluntarily put an end to our life? This question can be essentially declined in two different, but strictly related, questions: (1) is suicide morally permitted? and (2) can suicide be considered (at least in certain situations) a rational act? An analytic approach to this question is typical of recent, contemporary philosophy of suicide, which is now treated as an independent branch of philosophy. With few exceptions (like St. Thomas Aquinas and Hume), past philosophers have considered the question of the morality and/or rationality of suicide in a rather fragmentary way, so that their arguments in favour or against suicide, often to be found in detached passages of different works, must be pieced together in order to get a general view. As will be shown, this is precisely the case with the four philosophers considered in this book.

Nowadays, there are several valuable studies that offer an overview of the several philosophical (and religious) arguments that can be put forward in support or against one's right to commit suicide. The works of Cosculluela (1995), Battin (1996), Wittwer (2003), and Cholbi (2011) are good examples of this. The scope of these studies is often introductory. This means that, in presenting the several arguments pro and con they gain in comprehensiveness, but inevitably lack in depth.[1] The aim of this book is to address some of the same questions that these studies address. To this end, however, a different approach is followed. Attention is focused on four modern perspectives, which can be considered as representing or illustrating four different views of suicide. Putting forward seven different arguments against suicide and defending a strict prohibition of this act, Kant is a representative of the anti-libertarian view. Schopenhauer also essentially opposes suicide, but he does it as a consequence of his metaphysical view of the world, which is thoroughly pessimistic. His stance exemplarily shows that a pessimistic worldview does not necessarily go hand in hand with a pro-attitude towards suicide. Contrary to Kant, Nietzsche is rather

favourable to voluntary death, at least in certain specific situations. His stance, reminiscent of the Stoics', can be thus considered as representative of the libertarian view. Finally, Wittgenstein considers suicide from the standpoint of his mystical–religious worldview, conceiving it as the elementary sin. Addressing these different but, as will be shown, complementary positions, this book provides an unusual way of understanding the phenomenon of suicide in an integrated way. The book of course does not pretend to have an exhaustive character on the immense topic it touches upon, but what it lacks in comprehensiveness it gains in depth.

The reason to consider Kant's, Schopenhauer's, Nietzsche's, and Wittgenstein's views of suicide in the same book also derives from the fact that, as mentioned in the *Preface*, there is a *fil rouge* that links these views together. In the *Appendix* to the first volume of the *World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer clearly acknowledges that "however different the content of my line of reasoning is from that of Kant, it has clearly been very heavily influenced by Kantian ideas, it necessarily presupposes them, and takes them as its point of departure" (WWR I: 443/Schopenhauer 2010). When it comes to morality and its grounding, however, Schopenhauer's view is "diametrically opposed to Kant's in its essential points" (BM: 122/Schopenhauer 2009). This can be clearly seen in Schopenhauer's negative evaluation of Kant's view of suicide. Schopenhauer is very critical of the way in which Kant approaches suicide and several pages of his prize essay *On the Basis of Morals* are devoted to criticizing some of the arguments put forward by the latter.

Nietzsche's relation to Schopenhauer recalls, to a certain extent, Schopenhauer's relation to Kant. Nietzsche was deeply influenced by Schopenhauer ("my great teacher", he called him in the *Preface* to the *Genealogy of Morality*; GM, *Preface*, 5/Nietzsche 2006) and this influence is not limited to the former's early philosophy, as is often believed. At the same time, however, Nietzsche was a profound critic of Schopenhauer's life-denying philosophy. Thus Nietzsche partly elaborates his view of suicide in opposition to his teacher's, and, more in general, to

pessimistic attitudes to life. Indeed, due to the influence of Schopenhauer's thought, pessimistic philosophies were *à la mode* in the second half of the nineteenth century and Nietzsche knew them well. Furthermore, as mentioned, Nietzsche's view is also antithetical to Kant's—although this antithesis is not the result of Nietzsche's direct confrontation with Kant's arguments against suicide, but it rather depends on Nietzsche's more general critique of his moral theory.

If Schopenhauer criticizes Kant's view of suicide, and if Nietzsche opposes Schopenhauer's (directly) and Kant's (indirectly) approaches to suicide, Wittgenstein's most important remarks on suicide date from the early period, that is, at a time when his philosophy was strongly influenced by Schopenhauer's metaphysics (which takes Kant's transcendental idealism as starting point, as mentioned). Given that Schopenhauer exerted a major influence on the early Wittgenstein's understanding of the world and of ethics, it is not surprising to see that this influence also extends to the latter's view of suicide. In passing, it should be also mentioned that although it is not possible to know whether Wittgenstein was familiar with Nietzsche's remarks on suicide, it is a fact that in 1914 Wittgenstein bought the eighth volume of *Nietzsches Werke* (GT 8.12.14/Wittgenstein 1992), which contained several texts from 1888. Wittgenstein was most interested in Nietzsche's *The Anti-Christ*. In his Wittgenstein biography, Ray Monk comments on Wittgenstein's interest in Nietzsche as follows: "More stimulating was a writer whose view could not have been more antithetical to the Tolstoyan Christianity that Wittgenstein had come to embrace: Friedrich Nietzsche" (Monk 1991: 121). In reality, Wittgenstein's interest in Nietzsche can be easily explained. Indeed, although it is true that *The Anti-Christ* was a virulent attack upon the Christian religion and that Wittgenstein was "deeply affected" by Nietzsche's hostility against Christianity (GT 8.12.14), Nietzsche's work was strongly influenced by Tolstoy's view of Christianity (Llinares Chover 2010). As will be shown, precisely this view contributed to an important extent to shape Wittgenstein's view of suicide.

As one can see, there is a clear connection between Kant's, Schopenhauer's, Nietzsche's, and Wittgenstein's views of suicide. This connection, however, does not constitute the only reason for this book. Another reason is that, with the exception of Kant, the other three philosophers considered here are often ignored in the field of philosophy of suicide. This lack of attention seems to be motivated by reasons that are different in each case. Schopenhauer's opposition to suicide may be regarded as unappealing since it presupposes his peculiar and, by now, outdated metaphysics of the will. However, Schopenhauer is among the philosophers who gave most importance to the topic of suicide (like Hume, he dedicated a specific essay to suicide) and in his writings one can find interesting considerations of various nature on this subject. These considerations go far beyond his argument for the futility of suicide based on metaphysical grounds and Schopenhauer's approach to suicide is highly worthy of attention for the broadness of its scope and for being ahead of his time, among other reasons. One of the aims of this book is thus to revaluate Schopenhauer's view of suicide and bring it to the attention of contemporary scholars.

In the field of philosophy of suicide Nietzsche has received even less attention than Schopenhauer. This may come as a surprise if one considers that his published writings contain several remarks on suicide and that a speech from the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is significantly entitled *On Free Death*. This lack of attention can be differently accounted for. One reason might be the fragmentary and unsystematic character of Nietzsche's approach to suicide. Another reason might be the strong rhetorical component of the texts in which he presents his view. As will be shown, however, although Nietzsche tends to appeal to emotions instead of defending his position with proper arguments, he nonetheless gives his readers reasons that support his argumentation, and these reasons can be scrutinized and examined just in the same way as Kant's, Schopenhauer's, and Wittgenstein's arguments can be. A third reason that might explain why Nietzsche's view of suicide is often ignored in secondary literature on philosophy of suicide

is the fact that, along with the notion of free death, he also defends a quick death for all those who cling to life out of cowardice and fear, and refuse to take a timely leave from it. Without denying that considered from a contemporary perspective this latter notion appears unsettling, one should resist here the temptation of decontextualizing Nietzsche's words and reading them through the distorting prism of our historical perspective. In any case, the notions of free and quick death can and should be kept separated, so as to judge Nietzsche's arguments in favour of voluntary death without any bias.

Of the four philosophers considered in this study, Wittgenstein is the one who has received less attention in the field of philosophy of suicide. To my knowledge, the only in-depth study on Wittgenstein's view of suicide is the very recent paper by Gómez Alonso (2018) which, however, mainly (although not uniquely) focuses the attention on the relation between Wittgenstein's early view of suicide and Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the will. This lack of attention may be explained by the fact that Wittgenstein's remarks on suicide are very few in number and that in order to grasp their meaning it is necessary to understand some of the very complex and difficult notions that he introduces in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Once this difficult step is overcome, however, Wittgenstein's view of suicide appears very insightful and directly linked to some of the most profound thinkers of the nineteenth century such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, and James, among others.

Unlike Schopenhauer's, Nietzsche's, and Wittgenstein's views of suicide, Kant's view has been the subject of countless studies—as the extended bibliography of the second chapter of this book clearly shows. This should not be surprising, given that Kant's moral theory has exerted and continues to exert such an extraordinary influence on contemporary bioethics and applied ethics. Even in this case, however, some clarifications are needed. First, although there are several informative studies on Kant's view of suicide, to my knowledge, there is no comprehensive study in English on this subject. The only paper

that presents an overview of Kant's several arguments against suicide is Wittwer's (2001). However, this paper is almost twenty years old (although the analysis developed in it is still compelling) and is written in German, being therefore not easily accessible to the anglophone audience. Second, existing literature usually tends to focus the attention on Kant's arguments from the published writings, ignoring the arguments put forward in the *Lectures on Ethics*. Almost no attention has been paid, for instance, to Kant's *freedom argument* in the Collins lectures (see Sect. 2.2.3), according to which suicide would imply a self-contradiction of freedom. This is very surprising, considering that a similar line of argumentation is sometimes advanced within the context of the contemporary debate on assisted suicide. The aim of the first chapter of this book is thus to provide a *comprehensive* study of Kant's view of suicide and an in-depth examination of *all* his arguments against suicide. Third and finally, recent literature in English on this subject tends to question the conventional reading of Kant as a philosopher who categorically prohibits suicide. Some scholars even argue that, in certain situations, Kant's moral philosophy can be read as justifying not only a right, but even a duty to suicide. As I will show in the following chapter, these readings are often based on misunderstandings deriving either from incomplete information or from a lack of philological accuracy.

The methodology followed in this study primarily consists in a close and attentive reading of the primary sources (published writings, *Nachlass*, lectures, diaries, and letters). When necessary, attention is given to the German original. The main aim is to provide a complete overview of Kant's, Schopenhauer's, Nietzsche's, and Wittgenstein's views of suicide. As far as possible, each stance is presented as a unitary whole. On the other hand, however, chronological differences are taken into account. Kant's arguments from the Collins lectures (pre-critical period), for instance, are distinguished from the arguments that can be found in the published writings. At the same time, correspondences between the former and the latter are nevertheless emphasized. With the help of the relevant bibliography on the subject, the arguments in favour of

or against suicide put forward by the four philosophers considered in this study are explained, contextualized (when necessary), examined, and critically assessed. The approach of this book is thus not so much historical as philosophical in nature.

This book is constituted of four main chapters and a conclusion. To each philosopher's view of suicide is devoted one, single chapter. The following is a brief overview of the content of each chapter. Chapter 2 provides an in-depth examination of Kant's arguments against suicide. After a contextualization of Kant's prohibition of suicide (§2.1), following Wittwer (2001), I identify seven different arguments against the moral permissibility of suicide: three from the *Lectures on Ethics* (§2.2) and four from the published writings (§2.3). For each of them, I present the argument (and possible variations), point out strengths and flaws, and discuss possible objections and counter-objections, taking into consideration the abundant bibliography on the subject. I conclude that, against a recent trend in secondary literature, which tends to read Kant as justifying not only a right, but even a duty to suicide, Kant does not allow for any exception to his strict prohibition of suicide.

Chapter 3 provides a full and complete analysis of Schopenhauer's view of suicide. Drawing on the limited secondary literature on this subject (essentially, Fox (1980), Birnbacher (1985), Jacquette (1999, 2000), and Janaway (2017)), I first focus on Schopenhauer's dismissal of previous religious and philosophical arguments against this act, giving particular attention to his critique of Kant's arguments (§3.1). Subsequently, I briefly review the main points of his metaphysical worldview. Particular attention is given to Schopenhauer's gloomy understanding of human condition and to his conception of death (§3.2). Having sketched the main features of what is commonly known as Schopenhauer's pessimism, I finally examine Schopenhauer's own argument for the futility of suicide as well as his position on asceticism and on voluntary death by starvation (§3.3).

In Chap. 4 I turn my attention to Nietzsche. Given his unsystematic approach to suicide, I piece together his remarks

and observations on the subject in order to get a unitary picture. What is characteristic of Nietzsche's view of suicide is that he approaches this topic from two different, but interrelated points of view. On the one hand, he considers the question of whether, in certain specific situations, voluntary death can be a fully rational and natural choice. Within this context, he defends the idea of a free death at the right time. On the other hand, Nietzsche considers suicide from what might be defined as a proto-existentialist standpoint: the problem is to judge whether life is or is not worth living in a world devoid of meaning and purpose. Given the difference between the two approaches, I consider them separately. Thus, after a brief introduction in which I contextualize Nietzsche's view of suicide, I first consider his arguments in favour of the rationality of voluntary death (§4.1). Subsequently, I turn my attention to the notion of "free death", focusing particularly on some puzzling aspects that we are faced with when considering Nietzsche's view of suicide. I also contrast Nietzsche's free death with his polemic notion of "quick death" (§4.2). Finally, I consider how Nietzsche deals with the aforementioned question of whether life is worth living in a world devoid of meaning and purpose. Following a chronological order (early, middle, and late Nietzsche) and giving special attention to previous literature (essentially Young 2003 and Loeb 2008), I conclude that Nietzsche's answer to this question is affirmative (§4.3).

Chapter 5 is devoted to Wittgenstein's view of suicide. Attention is focused on the early period. This choice is motivated by two main reasons: first, Wittgenstein's most interesting remarks on suicide date from this period, and second, suicide was an intensely personal matter and a relatively recurrent thought for the young Wittgenstein. After an introduction in which I show how Wittgenstein's early life was affected by several suicides and how he himself often thought of this possibility, I first consider some of the important sources that influenced and shaped his view of suicide (§5.1). Subsequently, in order to contextualize his otherwise obscure remarks on suicide, I offer an overview of Wittgenstein's peculiar worldview, as it is presented in the *Tractatus*, as well as of his

understanding of ethics (§5.2). Finally, in the third and last section, I turn the attention to Wittgenstein's remarks on suicide, explaining their meaning and elucidating Wittgenstein's peculiar view of suicide (§5.3).

In Chap. 6, I present the most important conclusions that can be drawn when Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein are put into dialogue with each other. What do these philosophers have to say about suicide? What can we still learn from them? Here I address these questions, pointing out limits and merits of the four approaches considered in this book.

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Footnotes

1 Due to its length, Wittwer’s study combines, to a certain extent, comprehensiveness and depth.

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2. Immanuel Kant: The Moral Duty of Self-Preservation

Paolo Stellino[1] ✉
(1) Nova Institute of Philosophy, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, LISBOA, Portugal

✉ **Paolo Stellino**
Email: paolo.stellino@fcsh.unl.pt

Keywords Suicide – Kant – Dignity – Morality – Reason

2.1 Contextualizing Kant's Prohibition of Suicide

According to Margaret P. Battin, underlying the 2000-year-old theoretical debate about how we die and which should be the individual's role in his or her death is the Stoic/Christian divide: "whether one's role should be as far as possible active, self-assertive, and responsible and may include ending one's own life—or, on the other hand, acceptant, obedient, and passive in the sense of being patient, where 'allowing to die' is the most active step that should be taken" (Battin 2005: 6). Despite his willingness to recognize that there seems to be something moral in the Stoic attitude to suicide and that sometimes suicide is a mark of great heroism, Kant follows the Christian tradition in his consideration of self-preservation as "the *first*, though not the principal, duty of man to himself" (MM, 6/Kant 1991: 421).

In recent times, several studies have questioned the conventional reading of Kant as a philosopher who categorically prohibits suicide.[1] This has led Michael Cholbi (2015: 607) to claim that, "thanks to recent scholarship, Kant is no longer seen as the dogmatic opponent of suicide that he appears to be at first glance." Scholars have argued that, in certain situations, Kant's moral philosophy can be read as justifying not only a right but even a duty to suicide. Dennis R. Cooley (2007a, 2007b, and 2015), for instance, defends a Kantian moral duty for the soon-to-be demented to commit suicide. Other scholars focus attention on the casuistical questions presented in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (MM, 6: 423f.), arguing that some of them seem to permit suicide.[2]

One may wonder why, if Kant thought that in some occasions suicide could be permitted or even be considered as obligatory, he is reported to have said that suicide is not permitted "under any condition" (LE, Collins 27/1997: 372) and "under any circumstances" (LE, Vigilantius 27: 603). That Kant was unsympathetic to suicide is also shown by his cold and almost indifferent reply to Maria von Herbert, an Austrian woman and a student of his philosophy who, on the verge of suicide, wrote to him asking for his help and advice. Von Herbert was desperate because of a heartbreak and sought comfort in Kant's philosophy but could not find it. As a result, in August 1791 she wrote to Kant asking for help, for comfort or for counsel to prepare her for death. Kant answered in spring 1792 but was unable to relieve the young woman's grief. Von Herbert wrote again in January 1793 but Kant never replied. Eventually, the woman took her life in 1803.[3]

To this, one must add that Kant's views of suicide are very derogatory. In the *Lectures on Ethics*, suicide is described as "the most abominable of the crimes that inspire horror and hatred [*das abscheulichste Laster des Grausens und des Haßens*]" (LE, Collins 27: 347) and as "the most dreadful thing [*das schrecklichste*] that a man can do to himself" (LE,

Collins 27: 391). By committing it, the human being "puts himself below the beast" (LE, Collins 27: 372) and "makes himself into a monster" (A, 7: 259). How can these categorical and harsh claims be reconciled with the reading according to which "Kant does implicitly and explicitly allow exceptions to the general rule" (Cooley 2007a: 38)?

In reality, some of the interpretations that defend the view according to which Kant would have allowed exceptions to his categorical prohibition of suicide are based on misunderstandings deriving either from incomplete information or from a lack of philological accuracy. Kant's consideration of Cato's suicide is, in this sense, paradigmatic.[4] In the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant introduces Cato's suicide by claiming that "suicide can also come to have a plausible aspect [*scheinbare Seite*], whenever, that is, the continuance of life rests upon such circumstances as may deprive that life of its value; when a man can no longer live in accordance with virtue and prudence, and must therefore put an end to his life from honourable motives" (LE, Collins 27: 370). Cato had only two options available to him: either to fall into Caesar's hands—something which he considered dishonourable—or to take his life and preserve his honour. As Kant puts it, "he viewed his death as a necessity; his thought was: Since you can no longer live as Cato, you cannot go on living at all" (LE, Collins 27: 370f.).

According to Kant, Cato's suicide constitutes "the one example [*das einzige Beyspiel*] that has given the world an opportunity of defending suicide" (LE, Collins 27: 371). Scholars often refer to this passage to show that Kant's attitude towards suicide is not as dogmatic as it *prima facie* appears to be.[5] Surprisingly, the same scholars have failed to remark that later in the same lecture Kant again discusses Cato's suicide. If on the one hand Kant claims that Cato's suicide was a mark of heroism and courage, he also adds, on the other, that "if Cato, under all the tortures that Caesar might have inflicted on him, had still adhered to his resolve with steadfast mind, that would have been noble; but not when he laid hands upon himself. Those who defend and teach the legitimacy of suicide inevitably do great harm in a republic"[6] (LE, Collins 27: 374). As Yvonne Unna (2003: 464) points out, "Kant's reasoning suggests that it is one thing to sympathize with a person's wish to die an honorable death, yet another to justify the act of suicide. A violation of honor does not justify 'self-murder'."

Another source of misunderstanding stems from the five casuistical questions that follow the section dedicated to suicide in the *Metaphysics of Morals*[7] (MM, 6: 423f.). Given the fact that Kant poses the questions but does not provide an answer (at least, not in the *Metaphysics of Morals*), scholars have often taken the casuistical questions either to be open and unanswered, or even to permit suicide in some cases. So, for instance, both Battin (1996: 110) and James (1999: 49, 52) claim that Kant seems to consider Curtius' suicide as morally justifiable. Yet, Vigilantius reports Kant as saying that "it can never be allowable for me deliberately to yield up my life, or to kill myself in fulfilment of a duty to others; for example, when Curtius plunges into the chasm, in order to preserve the Roman people, he is acting contrary to duty" (LE, Vigilantius 27: 629).

In 2003, Yvonne Unna published a very detailed and compelling study of Kant's casuistical questions in the *Kant-Studien*. Unna's purpose was to put to rest any possible speculation about how Kant would have answered these questions by showing that Kant had actually answered or suggested an answer to four of the five casuistical questions of the *Metaphysics of Morals* elsewhere—more precisely, in the *Anthropology*, in the Vigilantius lectures, and in the *Nachlaß*. Unna's conclusion was that "all of Kant's replies confirm that he categorically rejects suicide as immoral"[8] (Unna 2003: 454). It is unfortunate to observe that Unna's paper has been often ignored by later studies on Kant's view of suicide. For instance, Cooley claimed on various occasions that Kant seems to consider the suicide of the man bitten by the rabid dog (MM, 6: 423f.) not only morally permissible but also morally obligatory.[9] This cannot be the case, for as Unna (2003: 461f.) rightly points out, Kant dismisses this possibility in a passage from the *Lectures on Ethics*.[10] It is, therefore, not true that "Kant the casuist was more conciliatory than Kant the doctrinarian"[11] (De

Vleeschauwer 1966: 254) nor that "many 'casuistical questions' remain"[12] (Cholbi 2000: 172).

As this brief analysis shows, there has been some misunderstanding on Kant's attitude towards suicide in past years due to partial reading of Kant's writings, lectures, and *Nachlaß*, incomplete information on existing bibliography, and lack of philological accuracy in reading the texts, among other factors. Needless to say, this does not mean that all studies that aim to refute Kant's alleged rigorism are based on false premises or lack philological accuracy. On the contrary, there exist plausible interpretations that point to concrete difficulties in Kant's view of suicide. One of these difficulties particularly concerns the fact that some of the examples chosen by Kant to strengthen his argumentation are in reality ad hoc examples. Another problem concerning Kant's stance on suicide is linked to the intricate relation between suicide and concepts such as dignity and autonomy—concepts that play a pivotal role in Kant's philosophy as well as in contemporary bioethics. I will address these issues later in this chapter. For now, I will present Kant's arguments for the immorality of suicide and consider some of the critiques that have been addressed or can be addressed to them.

Before I proceed with the analysis of Kant's arguments, however, I must draw attention to a fundamental distinction between *Kant's ethics* and *Kantian ethics*. Following Allen W. Wood (2008: 1), we can say that Kant's ethics is "the theory Kant himself put forward," whereas Kantian ethics is "an ethical theory formulated in the basic spirit of Kant." When considering Kant's attitude towards suicide, it is essential to distinguish between what Kant actually said and what one could say without betraying the spirit of his philosophy. There is a non-negligible difference between claiming that in certain occasions Kant seems to justify a right or a duty to suicide, and claiming that on certain occasions a Kantian right or duty to suicide seems to be justifiable. Thomas E. Hill (1991: 85), for instance, ascribes to Kant a "rigoristic opposition to suicide." He nonetheless finds Kant's position untenable and defends a modified Kantian view according to which "some suicides are justified and even commendable" (*id.*: 95). In what follows, I will only focus attention on Kant's attitude to suicide, leaving aside the rather different question of whether a Kantian right or duty to suicide might be, on certain occasions, justifiable.

With this distinction in mind, we can now consider Kant's several arguments for the impermissibility of suicide. As Seidler (1983: 440) points out, the topic of suicide "is virtually absent in Kant's pre-critical works, but it began to occupy him seriously in the mid-1770s and received explicit treatment in all major ethical writings thereafter." The relevant passages, though not the only ones, can be found in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the *Metaphysics of Morals*, the lectures recorded by Collins and Vigilantius, and the *Nachlaß*.[13] The German word that Kant uses to refer to the act of self-killing is *Selbstmord* (he also uses *Selbstentleibung* twice and *Selbsttödtung* once). This choice seems to be significant. Indeed, the German language has an incredibly rich vocabulary for the act of self-killing: *Selbsttötung*, *Selbsttod*, *Selbstvernichtung*, *Selbstentleibung*, *Suizid*, *freiwilliger Tod*, *Freitod*,[14] and the already mentioned *Selbstmord*. As Héctor Wittwer (2003: 27) points out, these words are not strict synonyms but rather have different denotations and connotations. The term *Selbstmord* emphasizes the fact that the one who is taking his or her own life is committing a crime.[15] Of all these words, *Selbstmord* was certainly the most commonly used at Kant's time. The word *Selbsttötung* as well as the expression *freiwilliger Tod* were, however, also available (*Selbsttod* and *Selbstat* were used, by contrast, very sporadically).[16] Kant's preference for the word *Selbstmord* does not seem to be determined by the fact that this was the noun commonly used at his time. Indeed, in the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant clearly characterizes *Selbstmord* as "*homicidium dolosum*," and claims that *Selbstentleibung* (literally, "self-disembodiment") "is a crime (murder) [*ist ein Verbrechen (Mord)*]" (MM, 6: 422).

Beyond this terminological clarification, in order to avoid possible misunderstandings it is important to understand what exactly Kant means or refers to when he employs the term

"suicide" (*Selbstmord*). In the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant draws a clear distinction between a suicide and a victim of fate. This distinction is explained by means of the following example: "he who shortens his life by intemperance, is certainly to blame for his lack of foresight, and his death can thus be imputed, indirectly, to himself; but not directly, for he did not intend to kill himself. It was not a deliberate death" (LE, Collins 27: 371). In this case, Kant argues, there is *culpa* but not *dolus*, that is, the intention to destroy oneself, which constitutes suicide, is lacking. In other words, contrary to a suicide, the victim of fate does not have the *direct and wilful intention* of ending his or her life.[17]

Another example that helps to clarify the distinction between a suicide and a victim of fate is Lucretia's suicide. Lucretia was a Roman noblewoman who had been raped by Sextus, the son of Tarquinius Superbus. Having confessed to her husband of her dishonour, she decided to commit suicide. Although Kant seems to sympathize with Lucretia's desire to preserve her honour, he nonetheless morally condemns her suicide. According to Kant, Lucretia "ought rather to have fought to the death in defence of her honour" (LE, Collins 27: 371). For by doing so, she would have acted rightly, since she would have preserved her honour and, at the same time, she would have not committed suicide. Indeed, as Kant puts it, "to risk one's life against one's foes, and to observe the duty to oneself, and even to sacrifice one's life, is not suicide" (ibid.). Note that the coherence of Kant's distinction between a suicide and a victim of fate is preserved by the implicit difference existing between fighting to the death in defence of one's honour and having the direct and wilful intention to end one's own death.[18]

According to Wittwer (2001: 181), Kant's consideration of Jesus' death in his 1793 work *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* points towards a second necessary element for there to be suicide, namely, that one be the *author* of his or her own death:

> Not that […] he [Jesus] *sought* death in order to promote a worthy purpose through a shining and sensational example; that would be suicide. For one may indeed dare something at the risk of losing one's life, or even endure death at the hand of another, when one cannot avoid it, without betraying an irremissible duty. But one cannot dispose of oneself and one's life as a means, whatever the end, and thus be the *author* [*Urheber*] of one's death. (R, 6/1998b: 81)

Admittedly, it is not very clear how the phrase "be the *author* of one's death" should be exactly interpreted. Wittwer (2001: 181; 2003: 122) reads this passage as meaning that, for there to be suicide, one has to give oneself death through one's own action. Consequently, he takes Kant's definition of suicide to exclude passive and indirect suicides. It is also possible, however, that Kant is using the term *Urheber* in a wider sense, meaning that for there to be suicide, one has to *intentionally cause* one's own death, be it directly inflicted by oneself or by another. It is, indeed, unlikely that Kant would have regarded someone who, being weary of life, intentionally and deliberately seeks death by throwing himself or herself into a pit of lions as a victim of fate and not as a suicide. In fact, as Kant puts it in the Collins lectures, "it is the intention to destroy oneself that constitutes suicide" (LE, Collins 27: 371). According to this reading, the passage from the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* quoted earlier should be interpreted as meaning that, in Kant's view, Jesus did not commit suicide, not because he did not give himself his own death but rather because it was not his intention to seek death.

Having provided a preliminary terminological clarification, we can now turn our attention to Kant's arguments for the immorality of suicide. Kant's arguments are often reduced to two or three.[19] In reality, at least seven different arguments against the moral permissibility of suicide can be found in Kant's writings and lectures[20]:

1)
The *religious argument* (LE, Collins 27: 375): we cannot freely dispose of our life, for we are God's property and depend on the disposition of His providence.
The *crime argument* (LE, Collins 27: 372): he, who is ready at any moment to sacrifice

2) his own life, no longer fears punishment; for he knows that, before he will be seized, he can kill himself. To him the door stands open to every crime.

3) The *freedom argument* (LE, Collins 27: 369; NF 6801, 19: 165): in committing suicide, we make use of freedom in order to abolish freedom but this is a contradiction.

4) The *natural law argument* (G, 4:421f.; CPrR, 5: 44): the suicide maxim cannot be thought as a universal law of nature without contradiction.

5) The *disposition argument* (LE, Collins 27: 343; NF 6801, 19: 165; G, 4: 429): when we commit suicide, we dispose of ourselves merely as a thing, that is, as a means to achieve an end. However, since a human being is not a thing but an end in itself, suicide cannot be morally permissible.

6) The *subject of duty argument* (MM, 6: 422): as a subject of duty, man cannot renounce his personality; for this would mean to be authorized to withdraw from all obligation.

7) The *morality argument* (MM, 6: 423): when we commit suicide, we root out the condition of the existence of morality from the world. This cannot be morally permissible, for morality is an end in itself.

As one can see, Kant's arguments have the peculiarity that, with the exception of the *religious* and the *crime argument*, they all consider the immorality of suicide from the perspective of the duties to oneself. Given the importance that Kant attaches to these duties, this aspect should not be overlooked. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant acknowledges that suicide can be also regarded as "a violation of one's duty to other human beings," for instance, "the duty of spouses to each other, of parents to their children, of a subject to his ruler or to his fellow citizens, and finally even as a violation of duty to God" (MM 6: 422). He nevertheless sets aside what is commonly known as the *role responsibilities argument*[21] —often considered as one of the strongest arguments against suicide—and focuses on the moral problem of whether, if a man puts to one side his duties to others, he is still bound to preserve himself.

First, to frame the problem in this way obviously means to presuppose the very existence of such a thing as a duty to oneself. Needless to say, this is not uncontroversial. In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill asserts, for instance, that "self-regarding faults […] are not properly immoralities […] they are only a subject of moral reprobation when they involve a breach of duty to others, for whose sake the individual is bound to have care for himself" (Mill 2003: 142). According to Marcus G. Singer, "it is actually impossible […] for there to be any duties to oneself, in any literal sense, for, if taken literally, the idea involves a contradiction" (Singer 1959: 202). Bernard Williams, in turn, defines duties to oneself as "fraudulent items" (1985: 182) and an "absurd apparatus" (1972: 69).

Without entering the debate on the existence of duties to oneself, which would lead us too far,[22] it should be noted that Kant not only does not doubt the existence of such duties but, as the following passage from the *Metaphysics of Morals* shows, he also considers them as playing a *foundational role* for all obligation (Timmermann 2006: 508):

> For suppose there were no such duties: Then there would be no duties whatsoever, and so no external duties either. For I can recognize that I am under obligation to others only insofar as I at the same time put myself under obligation, since the law by virtue of which I regard myself as being under obligation proceeds in every case from my own practical reason; and in being constrained by my own reason, I am also the one constraining myself. (MM, 6: 417–418)[23]

As Kant himself acknowledges, the problematic character of the concept of a duty to oneself lies in the fact that this concept seems to produce at first glance a contradiction which consists in that the I that imposes obligation is also the I that is put under obligation, being therefore the I at the same time actively binding and passively bound. As Kant explains, we think of moral duty in terms of a transitive relation where a person *a* actively imposes an obligation on the person *b* who is passively put under obligation. In this case, no contradiction arises, for the *auctor obligationis*, the one imposing obligation, is different from the *subiectum obligationis*, the one put under obligation. On the contrary, if the *auctor obligationis* and the *subiectum obligationis* are one and the same person, then the proposition asserting a duty to oneself contradictorily expresses a passive obligation, which is, in the same sense of the relation, also an active obligation. Moreover, if the one imposing obligation and the one put under obligation coincide in the same person, then one can always release oneself from the obligation.

Kant resolves this contradiction by pointing out the distinction existing between two different ways of conceiving the human being. On the one hand, man is a *natural being* (*Naturwesen*) who has reason and who can be determined to actions by his or her reason as a *cause* (*homo phaenomenon*). On the other hand, however, he or she is also a being endowed with inner freedom, able to be put under obligation to the humanity in his or her person (*homo noumenon*). As Jens Timmermann (2006: 509) points out, the latter is the authoritative "noumenal" self (the *auctor obligationis*) whereas the former is the subjected "phenomenal" self (the *subiectum obligationis*). In this way, Kant explains, a "man (taken in these two different senses) can acknowledge a duty to himself without falling into contradiction (because the concept of man is not thought in one and the same sense)"[24] (MM 6: 418).

Having considered how Kant deals with the contradiction that duties to oneself seem to generate, we can now turn our attention to Kant's arguments for the immorality of suicide. In what follows, I will first focus on the arguments from the *Lectures on Ethics* and, subsequently, on the ones put forward in the published writings.

2.2 Arguments from the Lectures on Ethics

Before turning the attention to Kant's arguments against suicide from the *Lectures on Ethics*, a clarification is needed. All the three arguments that follow are to be found in the Collins lectures. Although Collins' manuscript gives the impression that the notes were taken during the winter semester 1784–85, in reality, Collins copied the notes from a pre-existing copy based on lectures that Kant held most probably around 1775.[25] This means that this set of notes are from the pre-critical period. To avoid anachronism in what follows, I will thus reduce to a minimum references to the critical period. At the same time, however, it must be noted that there is a certain correspondence between the Collins lectures and Kant's later works. As Manfred Kuehn (2015: 53) points out, "this correspondence can, of course, be approximate only because Kant, in 1775, had not clearly developed his own conception of ethics. Still, it is surprising how much light the lectures throw on later developments and how far the correspondences go."[26]

Besides this chronological clarification, it is also necessary to recall the special status of the *Lectures on Ethics*. As Stefano Bacin (2015: 15) points out, the notes from Kant's lectures cannot be considered self-standing texts for two reasons: not only because Kant did not author them (the notes were taken by his students) but also because he taught philosophy following Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Initia philosophiae practicae primae* (1760) and *Ethica philosophica* (1740, 1751, 1763). These two texts provided the outline for Kant's *Lectures on Ethics*. This does not mean, however, that Kant's *Lectures* were a mere commentary of Baumgarten's texts. On the contrary, as Bacin (*id.*: 32) points out,

> [a]n investigation of Baumgarten's significance for Kant's moral philosophy cannot show any deep continuity between their views. Baumgarten does highlight some themes that become crucial in Kant's ethical thought, especially obligation and the related concept of necessitation, along with the necessity of a noneudaimonist understanding of perfectionism. Still, their agreement on fundamental issues in moral philosophy is confined to very specific points. Furthermore, every one of these shared points is combined with serious objections of Kant's against Baumgarten.[27]

More particularly, for what concerns the following three arguments against suicide, a quick look at Baumgarten's treatment of suicide in sections 250–252 of *Ethica philosophica* (*Officia erga te ipsum*, (B) *corpus, quo cura*, (1) *vitae*; Baumgarten 1751: 130–132) suffices to see how much more nuanced, detailed, and original Kant's own treatment of the same subject in the Collins lectures was.

2.2.1 The Religious Argument

In the *Lectures on Ethics* (Collins 27: 375), Kant considers suicide in regard to religion and justifies the impermissibility of suicide by making reference to one of the most ancient and influential religious arguments, namely the argument based on the property analogy.[28] This argument runs as follows: God is our proprietor and we are His property. We cannot freely dispose of ourselves by taking our life, unless we have His express command,[29] for this would mean to destroy a property which we do not own. The unstated premise of this argument is that, since God is our creator, he is also our proprietor, exactly in the same way that "an artist creating a painting or sculpture gives the artist property rights in that artwork" (Cholbi 2011: 45).

In the same passage from the Collins lectures, Kant develops another line of argumentation which runs parallel to the first one: God has placed us on earth for certain destinies and purposes. Among these purposes, Kant claims, there is the preservation of our life. This is shown by the fact that our nature has been endowed with "preservative powers [*Erhaltungskräften*]" (LE, Collins 27: 375). By taking our life, we flout God's intention and upset the wisdom of our nature's arrangements. In order to clarify his argument, Kant makes use of a metaphor that comes from the military context: human beings are stationed like sentries on earth by God, and should not desert their posts, unless God commends them to do so.[30] The same metaphor later reappears in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, when Kant claims that suicide can be considered "even as a violation of duty to God, as man's abandoning the post assigned him in the world without having been called away from it" (MM 6: 422).

Being a religious argument, Kant's first argument against the permissibility of suicide has obviously a limited appeal. Indeed, it assumes as a necessary premise the existence of God—more specifically, of a God who owns us as His property and who places us on earth with a specific intention. Needless to say, the belief in God is not universally shared. Therefore, Kant's argument has no force for those who do not give validity to the necessary premise on which this argument rests. Having pointed this out and leaving aside other well-known problems of analogy-based religious arguments,[31] it should be noted that Kant's argument runs into further difficulties that are related to his philosophy. A major difficulty stems, for instance, from Kant's claim that man is a property of God. In fact, Kant's conception of human beings as ends in themselves seems to rule out the possibility that human beings could be considered as things, that is, as properties that can be owned.[32] The following passage from the Collins lectures clearly shows that, according to Kant, man cannot be a property:

> Man cannot dispose over himself, because he is not a thing. He is not his own property —that would be a contradiction; for so far as he is a person, he is a subject, who can have ownership of other things. But now were he something owned by himself, he

> would be a thing over which he can have ownership. He is, however, a person, who is not property, so he cannot be a thing such as he might own; for it is impossible, of course, to be at once a thing and a person, a proprietor and a property at the same time. (LE, Collins 27: 386)

Note that in this passage Kant argues not only that man is not his own property but also and more in general that he can never be considered as a property: he is a person, not a thing that can be owned. Indeed, this is precisely the reason for which man cannot dispose of himself. For this, as will be shown, would mean to debase humanity in his own person by treating himself as a thing. It is therefore difficult to say in which sense Kant's claim that we are God's property should be interpreted. As Wittwer (2001: 183) points out, a metaphorical reading of this claim would weaken the argument. On the other hand, a literary reading faces the problem of explaining how the claim that we are God's property can be reconciled with the claim that a person is not a property.

Even the theory of property that Kant later develops in the *Metaphysics of Morals* proves unhelpful. Indeed, the possible analogy between the right that God acquires against man through creation and the right that the couple acquires against children through procreation points to a fundamental difference, which is also highlighted by the terminology that Kant employs in the *Doctrine of Right*. According to Kant, although a child "belongs to his parents as what is theirs (is still in their *possession* [*Besitz*] like a thing)," he "can never be considered as the property [*Eigenthum*] of his parents" (MM, 6: 282). This comes from the fact that "the offspring is a *person*" (*id.*: 280). As a consequence, parents "cannot destroy their child as if he were something they had *made* [*als ihr Gemächsel*[33]] (since a being endowed with freedom cannot be a product of this kind) or as if he were their property" (*id.*: 281). Moreover, when children reach their majority, they emancipate, that is, "they become their own masters [*Herren*] (*sui iuris*) and acquire this right without any special act to establish it and so merely by principle (*lege*) […] both children and parents acquire or reacquire their natural freedom"[34] (*id.*: 282).

As these passages clearly show, Kant thinks that parents cannot consider a child as their own property, for a child is a person, and a person cannot be a property, as already pointed out in the Collins lectures. The ownership right that parents have towards a child is rather that of an *intelligible* possession (*possessio noumenon*), that is, a merely *rightful* (not physical) possession. As we have seen, this possession holds until the child reaches his or her majority. Thenceforth, the child rightfully becomes his or her own master. For all these reasons, the analogy between God creating man and having a property right for this creation, on the one hand, and parents procreating children and having an intelligible possession right against them, on the other, cannot be used to lend support to Kant's religious argument.

To conclude the analysis, following Cholbi (2000: 162), it should be pointed out that in this argument "the wrongness of suicide rests on a heteronomous source." Yet, as Kant will clearly state later in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, those principles that set up heteronomy of the will as the first ground of morality miss their mark (G, 4: 443). Precisely in the relation between religion and morality, however, lies one of the most important differences between the position that Kant holds in the Collins notes and the position that he holds in the critical period. As Kuehn (2015: 58–59) points out, whereas in the critical period religion and philosophy are closely connected together but one does not need to believe in God to be moral, in the Collins notes "religion is indispensable. […] Morality alone is insufficient to protect us." As Kant puts it, "it is impossible to cherish morally pure dispositions without believing at the same time that they are linked to a being who observes them. And it is equally impossible to turn to morality without a belief in God. All moral precepts would count for nothing, therefore, if there were no being to oversee them" (LE, Collins 27: 307).

On the other hand, it should be also mentioned that, in the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant considers morality as prior to religion.[35] Thus, he concludes his analysis of the religious argument by making clear that "suicide […] is impermissible and abhorrent, not because God has forbidden it; God has forbidden it, rather, because it is abhorrent"[36] (LE, Collins 27: 375). In other words, as Kant explains in the later lectures recorded by Vigilantius, "the impermissibility of suicide must therefore be presupposed, in order to infer a divine prohibition of it. The ground thereof is thus a law of reason, from which the immorality of this action proceeds" (LE, Vigilantius 27: 627). Thus, in accordance with his rationalism and embracing the first horn of the well-known Euthyphro dilemma,[37] Kant is careful in pointing out that suicide is immoral not because God forbids it but rather because it goes against the moral law. This does not mean, however, that Kant ends up abandoning the religious argument in the Collins lectures (on the contrary, if considered in regard to religion, suicide is for Kant to be condemned) but simply that, given the fact that the moral laws are not to be derived from God's will, "all moralists must begin by demonstrating its [suicide's] inherent abhorrency" (LE, Collins 27: 375). As will be shown in the following pages, the aim of the remaining six arguments is precisely to provide moral reasons for the impermissibility of suicide.

2.2.2 The Crime Argument

In the Collins lectures, Kant defines suicide as "the most horrifying thing imaginable" (LE, Collins 27: 372) and justifies his claim as follows:

> For anyone who has already got so far as to be master, at any time, over his own life, is also master over the life of anyone else; for him, the door stands open to every crime, and before he can be seized he is ready to spirit himself away out of the world. (ibid.)

The same point is reiterated a few pages later. Before putting forward the religious argument considered in the previous section, Kant argues thus:

> Those who defend and teach the legitimacy of suicide inevitably do great harm in a republic. Suppose it were a general disposition that people cherished, that suicide was a right, and even a merit or honour; such people would be abhorrent to everyone. For he who so utterly fails to respect his life on principle can in no way be restrained from the most appalling vices; he fears no king and no torture.[38] (*id.*: 374–375)

As Battin (1996: 80) points out, this is an uncommon but not uninteresting argument, to which scholars have given less attention.[39] According to Kant, suicide cannot be morally permitted, because the disposition to it brings with it a loss of moral restraint that cannot be but harmful to society. Indeed, the thought of being punished no longer restrains the would-be suicide from committing even the worst crimes. For the person knows that, before she will be seized, she will take her own life, going thus unpunished for her crimes. In his analysis of this argument, Wittwer (2001: 184–185) draws particular attention to two elements. First, the prohibition of suicide deriving from this argument is not unconditional but rather conditional. Indeed, the immoral character of suicide is dependent on the consequences that this act could have for society. In other words, the prohibition following from this argument would not be valid, for instance, for a man stranded on a desert island. Second, precisely the fact that the immorality of suicide derives from the consequences of this act makes this argument as morally irrelevant if judged from the (later) perspective of Kant's critical ethics. In fact, as Kant clearly puts it in the *Groundwork* (G, 4/Kant 2011: 403), a maxim that cannot be willed as a universal law must be rejected "not because of some disadvantage to you, or to others, that might result but because it cannot fit as a principle into a possible universal legislation."

Besides these considerations, the argument put forward by Kant seems *prima facie* intuitively plausible. Indeed, one might ask, what does refrain a man who is willing to take

his life from committing even the worst crimes? Surely, not the fear of punishment. For, as Kant himself points out, the same man can at any moment resort to suicide in order to avoid getting caught and being obliged to pay for his crimes. Suppose, for instance, that I am willing to commit suicide but I am in no hurry to die. What does deter me from robbing a bank and spending the money in the nearest casino? If I get caught, I will take a poison pill. If not, I will anyway commit suicide but I will spend my last night having great fun or pleasure.

Plausible as it may seem, however, Kant's argument disregards several important factors. To begin with, my willingness to take my own life could cause a loss of fear of *earthly* punishment but I could nevertheless refrain from immoral acts because of my fear of *divine* punishment. Furthermore, I could care for my post-mortem moral reputation, finding it unacceptable to be remembered by posterity as a bank robber. Moreover, Kant seems to overlook the fact that my refraining from crime could be motivated by moral reasons and thus be completely independent from legal consequences. I may judge paedophilic rape to be morally disgusting. Will the fact that I have decided to take my own life affect or change my moral attitude towards it? It seems highly implausible to think so—exactly in the same way that it is implausible to suppose that, *mutatis mutandis*, a man who has been diagnosed with terminal illness will change his moral attitude and begin to commit even the worst crimes only because he knows that he has a short time left to live.

As Wittwer (2003: 376) rightly points out, in order to consider Kant's argument as cogent it should be shown that and explained how the disposition to suicide implies the disposition to immoral behaviour. One way to establish this link would be to look for some empirical evidence in recent studies on two specific subsets of the phenomenon known as "murder-suicide" or "homicide-suicide,"[40] namely school shootings followed by suicide and suicide terrorism. In his analysis of the well-known Columbine High School shooting,[41] Thomas Joiner calls attention to the fact that the shooters' suicidality formed first, well before plans for the shooting: "suicide came first for both of them; homicide came later, and developed as a function of their perverted views of glory" (Joiner 2014: 174). According to Joiner, this primacy of suicide over murder in the murder–suicide equation would be an underappreciated aspect not only of many other cases of school shooting but also of suicide terrorism:

> There is evidence that many suicide terrorists struggle with depression, develop suicidal wishes, and channel their suicidality into terrorism. […] [T]he logic of the suicide terrorist is very similar to that of the murder-suicide perpetrator: "I have decided on suicide, but as long as I am to die, it is dutiful, just, and glorious that I kill others on behalf of my people." Here, suicide terrorism is personal and only incidentally political. (Joiner 2014: 175)

Although Joiner's analysis seems to provide some empirical evidence of the link established in Kant's argument between the disposition to suicide and the consequent disposition to immoral behaviour, it must be said, however, that homicide-suicide remains a relatively rare event with an incidence rate approximately oscillating between 0.05 and 0.02/0.03 per 100.000 persons.[42] If we consider that, according to the World Health Organization (2014: 7), the worldwide suicide rate in 2014 was of 11.4 per 100.000 persons, we obtain a rate of 1 homicide-suicide every 228 suicides (that is, 0.43%).[43] This rate is surely insufficient to provide substantive empirical evidence for Kant's argument. Furthermore, one should not overlook the fact that the category of "murder-suicide" or "homicide-suicide" also includes all those cases in which suicide is, so to say, a post hoc decision, that is, a decision which is taken only after having committed a murder. In many cases, it is simply not possible to establish whether the decision to commit suicide was taken before or after the murder. Kant's argument, however, precisely requires that the decision to commit suicide be taken *before* the decision to commit murder, given that crime is

presented in the argument as the possible consequence of the loss of moral restraint caused by the disposition to take one's life.

What is more, as Battin (1996: 81) points out, there is some evidence that the kind of lawlessness that Kant fears can be paradoxically encouraged by strict sanctions against suicide, rather than by permissive attitudes towards it. Battin mentions, for instance, the case of individuals who, belonging to cultures that strictly prohibit suicide, perpetrate serious crimes in order to be killed:

> For example, in traditional Muslim culture, as sociologist and criminologist Ruth Cavan points out, self-murder is very strictly prohibited, but the murder of "infidels" is not. "Running amok," she claims, is a fairly highly institutionalized behavior in which a believer commits a series of murders of nonbelievers, and continues to do so until he himself is killed. Since direct suicide is prohibited, the individual is forced to resort to murder in order to bring about his own death. (ibid.)

Battin recognizes that these practices may be outdated and find no place in contemporary Islam. However, "they do illustrate a counterargument to the Kantian claim" (ibid.). She also adds that the same practices may theoretically occur in contemporary American society where, as Joel Feinberg (1978: 111) points out, the inalienability but forfeitability of the right to life may involve the paradox that the would-be suicide must take someone else's life in order to get rid of his or her own life:

> There is at least one striking paradox in the traditional view that the right to life can be forfeited (by the condemned murderer where capital punishment is permitted by law) but not voluntarily alienated. The would-be suicide can lose the right to life he no longer wants only by murdering someone else and thereby forfeiting the right that keeps him from his desired death. The inalienability of his right to life permits him to shed that unwanted life only by taking the life of someone else and thereby forfeiting it. Those who believe in the inalienability of the right to life, therefore, might well think twice before endorsing its forfeitability. (Feinberg 1978: 112)

In conclusion, Kant's appeal to the dangerous social consequences that may derive from a defence of the legitimacy of suicide seems to fail to survive critical scrutiny. Although *prima facie* plausible, Kant's argument disregards several important factors that can cause a would-be suicide to refrain from immoral acts or crime. On the other hand, the numerical correlation between homicide-suicides and suicides of all kinds clearly shows that the link that Kant establishes between the disposition to suicide and the disposition to immoral behaviour is far from being supported by empirical evidence. Furthermore, as Battin points out, strict sanctions against suicide can paradoxically encourage the very kind of lawlessness that, according to Kant, may be caused by permissive attitudes towards suicide.

2.2.3 The Freedom Argument

Given the considerable attention that Kant's view of suicide has received over the years, it is surprising to observe that almost no attention has been paid to one of his most interesting arguments, namely the argument according to which suicide would imply a self-contradiction of freedom. This argument deserves all the more attention if we consider that a similar line of argumentation is sometimes advanced within the context of the debate on assisted suicide.[44] Kant's argument, also mentioned in passing in note 6801 (NF 6801, 19/Kant 2005: 165), is to be found in the Collins lectures, more precisely in the section "Of Duties to the Body, in regard to Life." In this section, Kant considers the question of whether we have the right to dispose of our life. Kant approaches this question by pointing out that the body does not belong to life in a contingent way but is the "total condition of life," so that the use of freedom is possible only through it. Therefore, if we dispose of our life, we make use of

freedom in order to destroy the body, which is the condition of freedom. This means that we employ freedom in order to abolish freedom. But this, Kant argues, is a contradiction:

> So far, then, as anyone destroys his body, and thereby takes his own life, he has employed his choice [*seine Willkühr*] to destroy the power of choosing [*die Macht seiner Willkühr*] itself; but in that case, free choice [*freye Willkühr*] is in conflict [*widerstreitet*] with itself. If freedom [*Freiheit*] is the condition of life, it cannot be employed to abolish life, since then it destroys and abolishes itself; for the agent is using his life to put an end to it. Life is supposedly being used to bring about lifelessness [*Leblosigkeit*], but that is a self-contradiction [*welches sich aber widerstreitet*]. (LE, Collins 27: 369)

As Paul Guyer (2005: 180) points out, "this argument depends on the supposition that life is the condition of freedom as well as the fact, which Kant emphasizes, that freedom is the condition of life: freedom is the condition of life in that it is what gives life its value, but life is the condition of freedom in that it is what makes freedom possible." Whereas one can easily understand why Kant maintains that life is the condition of freedom—indeed, in order to exercise freedom, one must be alive—the opposite claim calls for explanation. In Kant's view, freedom is what gives life its value because freedom is what distinguishes humans from the other animals, giving to the former the capacity to choose according to rational rules. If in the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant defines freedom as "the *ratio essendi* of the moral law" (CPrR, 5/Kant 2007a: 4), in the Collins lectures, freedom is characterized as "the highest degree of life. It is the property that is a necessary condition underlying all perfections" (LE, 27 Collins: 344). In short, freedom is "the inner worth of the world, the *summum bonum*" (ibid.).

This clarification allows us to understand why, according to Kant, the use of freedom to destroy ourselves is problematic in two regards: (1) it is self-contradictory, for we employ freedom in order to abolish freedom, and (2) it cannot be permitted, for freedom has an "inner worth" and is what gives value to the world. This second argumentative line is akin to the one developed by Kant in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (MM, 6: 423). When we commit suicide, so Kant argues, we annihilate the subject of morality in one's own person. As a consequence, we root out the condition of the existence of morality from the world. However, this cannot be morally permissible, for morality is an end in itself. Similarly, in the Collins lectures Kant claims that when we commit suicide, we destroy the body. As a consequence, we root out the condition of the existence of freedom from the world. However, this cannot be morally permissible, for freedom has an inner worth (is a *summum bonum*). Given this similarity and since the argument developed in the *Metaphysics of Morals* will be examined in depth in the section dedicated to Kant's *morality argument*, I will, in what follows, exclusively pay attention to the alleged self-contradiction of freedom implied in the act of suicide.

The first thing that strikes the attention in Kant's claim that "the suicide also displays freedom in the greatest opposition to itself" (NF 6801, 19: 165) is that this conception of suicide is exactly antithetical to the one defended, for instance, by Seneca in his *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, where suicide is defined as "a path to freedom [*libertatis viam*]" (Seneca 1925: Vol. 2, 65). Contrary to Kant, Seneca conceives suicide as an affirmation, rather than a denial or a self-contradiction of freedom. This neat opposition can be easily explained: whereas Seneca is interested in placing emphasis on the freedom that can be achieved through suicide (for instance, freedom from a demeaning condition or from physical suffering), Kant rather underlines the fact that freedom is a *summum bonum*, which man is deprived of when he commits suicide.

Strictly speaking, the act of suicide cannot bring with it freedom; nor can it be a road or a path to freedom. For death marks the exact moment in which the suicide ceases to exist. Certainly, the choice of committing suicide, which precedes death, can be free and, to that extent, the act of suicide can be regarded as symbolizing a (last) affirmation of the suicide's

freedom.[45] But this freedom ends as soon as the suicide takes his or her own life. To make this point clear, let us consider the case of a slave who commits suicide because he can no longer endure his enslaved condition. It is certainly possible to claim, in a metaphorical way, that this slave has freed himself from his chains. However, this does not obviously mean that he continues to live as a free individual but rather that he no longer lives as an enslaved individual, that is, as an individual who is not free. His suicide can be considered as an affirmation of freedom but this expression should be then interpreted as meaning, for instance, that, by taking his life, the slave has asserted the primacy of the value of freedom over all other values (better to die than to live without freedom).

In the same way in which, strictly speaking, suicide cannot bring with it freedom, it cannot destroy or abolish freedom either. For this would imply the continued existence of a person whose freedom has been destroyed or abolished as a consequence of a suicidal act. This, however, is not possible, since death is precisely the moment in which one ceases to exist. In other words, in order to have a self-contradiction (as Kant claims in the passage from the Collins lectures) it is necessary that the suicide continues to live a life deprived of freedom (or of the power of choosing, as Kant also puts it) *after* having committed suicide. However, since this is not possible, no self-contradiction arises. As Wittwer (2003: 145) plainly puts it: "[t]he act of suicide is carried out before death and ends with it. As long as the suicide lives, he does not undermine his freedom. As soon as he is dead, he does no longer exist, so that he cannot be defined as 'not-free'."

To make this clear, it is helpful to compare the case of a man who commits suicide with that of a man who decides to become a slave. John Stuart Mill discusses the latter case in Chap. 5 of *On Liberty*. More precisely, Mill examines the grounds for limiting man's power of voluntarily disposing of his own life. According to Mill (2003: 164), although man's voluntary choice is evidence that what he so chooses is desirable to him,

> by selling himself for a slave, he abdicates his liberty; he foregoes any future use of it, beyond that single act. He therefore defeats, in his own case, the very purpose which is the justification of allowing him to dispose of himself. […] The principle of freedom cannot require that he should be free not to be free. It is not freedom, to be allowed to alienate his freedom.

The comparison of the two cases shows that, whereas the man who sells himself for a slave employs freedom to abolish freedom and, as a consequence, will live as a man deprived of freedom, the man who commits suicide makes use of freedom in order to put an end to his life. To that extent, he will no longer exist, either as a free man or as a man who is not free. In other words, whereas the man who decides to become a slave continues to exist under the constraint of a loss of freedom,[46] the man who commits suicide does not suffer any loss of freedom, for, as already mentioned, as soon as he voluntarily takes his life, he ceases to exist.

Following the distinction made by Korsgaard (1996a: 78) between three different interpretations of the kind of contradiction (logical, teleological, and practical) arising from the universalization of the maxim according to the categorical imperative, it may be argued that what Kant has in mind in the passage from the Collins lectures is not a logical but rather a teleological contradiction.[47] Accordingly, to make use of freedom in order to abolish freedom (as in the case of suicide) would imply a self-contradiction in that freedom is used against its natural purpose or in a way that is inconsistent with it. Kant seems to have precisely this in mind when he claims that the abominable nature of suicide resides in the fact that "a man uses his freedom to destroy himself, when he ought to use it solely to live as a man" (LE, Collins 27: 343).

To make this clear, consider Kant's definition of freedom in the practical sense (in the *Critique of Pure Reason*) as "the independence of the power of choice [*Willkühr*] from necessitation by impulses of sensibility" (CPR, A 534/ B 562/Kant 1998a). The human power of choice is an *arbitrium sensitivum* (it is pathologically affected through moving-causes of

sensibility), yet not *brutum* but *liberum*, because "sensibility does not render its action necessary, but in the human being there is a faculty of determining oneself from oneself, independently of necessitation by sensible impulses" (ibid.). We can find a similar distinction in the Collins lectures, when Kant explains that "all animals have the capacity to use their powers according to choice. Yet this choice is not free, but necessitated by incentives and *stimuli*. Their actions contain *bruta necessitas* [*animal necessity*]" (LE, Collins 27: 344). Conversely, the human power of choice is free, that is, it is not necessitated to act by sensible impulses. In other words, man differs from the animals in that the choice of the latter is *subjectively* necessitated, that is, necessitated by sensory drives, whereas the former has the capacity to use his powers according to a choice that is free. At the same time, however, this choice must be *objectively* necessitated, that is, restricted by objective rules or objectively necessitating grounds, otherwise lawlessness follows, and it is "uncertain whether man will not use his powers to destroy himself" (LE, Collins 27: 344).

The aforementioned distinction allows one to understand why Kant is so strongly opposed to suicide. In his view, when man commits suicide, he freely follows his inclinations (*Neigungen*), that is, he allows his person to be governed by them, instead of determining them through freedom (*id.*: 345). In so doing, however, he subordinates his humanity to animal nature, and his understanding "is under the sway of animal impulse" (*id.*: 1428). This, however, implies that man uses freedom contrary to its natural purpose, that is, he uses it in a self-contradictory way: instead of setting his own ends, he has them imposed by inclination.[48] As Kant puts it, "[a]nyone who allows his person to be governed by his inclinations is acting contrary to the essential end of mankind, for as a free agent he must not be subject to his inclinations, but should determine them through freedom" (*id.*: 345). This is precisely the reason for which Kant considers the nature of the act of suicide as "inherently abominable" (*id.*: 343). By committing it, one is "lower even than the animals, for in that case there arises in him a lawlessness that does not exist among them" (*id.*: 345).

It is not difficult to see that the problematic aspect of Kant's argument lies in his view of the act of suicide as accomplished "under the sway of animal impulse." Indeed, Kant's view according to which a man who commits suicide would follow his inclinations can be seen as biased, too reductive, and even contrary to empirical evidence. As a matter of fact, there is little doubt that at least some men take the decision to commit suicide, not under the sway of inclination but rather following rational deliberation. This is a possibility that Kant does not seem willing to take into account precisely because, for him, suicide breaks the supreme rule from which the objectively necessitating grounds that restrict freedom must be derived. Kant states this supreme rule as follows: "in all self-regarding actions, so to behave that any use of powers is compatible with the greatest use of them" (*id.*: 346). Suicide is contrary to this rational rule because in this act freedom comes into collision with itself, that is, the self-consistency of freedom, which the rule prescribes, is violated.[49]

Kant's claim that the suicide acts following his inclination and, therefore, is not using freedom properly must not thus be understood as an empirical claim. This claim is rather based on the fact that a rational use of freedom implies that one must act according to objectively necessitating grounds that restrict the use of freedom. The supreme rule of these objectively necessitating grounds is that any use of freedom must be self-consistent and non-contradictory. As we have seen, this contradiction is not to be understood as a logical but rather as a teleological contradiction. Here, however, Kant's argument seems to run into a circle. Indeed, recall that according to the teleological interpretation of Kant's argument (or to be more precise, the teleological interpretation of the self-contradiction arising from the use that the suicide makes of freedom), the answer to the question of whether a man can use his freedom to take his own life depends on whether this use of freedom can be consistent with its natural purpose. This natural purpose consists in the use of freedom according to objectively necessitating grounds, the supreme rule of which prescribes that freedom be used in a self-consistent and non-contradictory way (that is, that the use of freedom be compatible with the greatest use of it). Kant claims that suicide

breaks this rule, for if a man takes his own life, he deprives himself of the ability to use freedom (hence, the contradiction). As shown, this contradiction can be interpreted either as a logical or a teleological contradiction. In the former case, the (logical) contradiction is only apparent for the reasons already mentioned earlier: the man who commits suicide does not suffer any loss of freedom, for as soon as he voluntarily takes his life, he ceases to exist. In the latter case, the (teleological) contradiction derives from the fact that the suicide makes use of freedom in a way that is considered by Kant to be inconsistent with its natural purpose. However, that the use of freedom to commit suicide is inconsistent with its natural purpose is precisely what the argument was supposed to establish. Thus, in both cases Kant's appeal to self-consistency of freedom seems to fail to show that suicide is morally impermissible: if the inconsistency is interpreted in logical terms, the same inconsistency is merely apparent, whereas if the inconsistency is interpreted in teleological terms, the argument begs the question.

2.3 Arguments from the Published Writings

2.3.1 The Natural Law Argument

If in the Collins lectures Kant condemns suicide arguing that man should not freely follow his inclinations but rather act according to objective moral rules, in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* he maintains that man should not preserve his life because he is naturally inclined to do so but rather because it is his moral duty to do so. Here Kant introduces a key distinction between actions that *conform to duty* and actions that are *done from duty*. This distinction is clarified in the first section of the work by means of the example of someone who is weary of life and still preserves it (G, 4: 397–398). According to Kant, all humans have a natural inclination to preserve life. This is why, when we attend to it with anxious care, we act in conformity to duty but not from it: in this case the maxim of our action has no moral content. On the contrary, when we long for death and still decide to preserve our life not from inclination or fear but because we are morally required to do so, we act from duty. In this case our maxim has a moral content. Kant puts forward two arguments in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* to justify the moral duty to preserve one's life, or more precisely, to show that when we take our own life we act contrary to duty: the *natural law argument*, which can also be found in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (CPrR, 5: 44), and the *disposition argument*. In what follows, attention will be devoted to the former argument, whereas the latter will be the focus of the next section.

In order to introduce the natural law argument it is necessary to take into consideration the formula of the law of nature, namely one of the various formulations of the categorical imperative. In the second section of the *Groundwork*, having laid the basis for the distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives, Kant introduces the following well-known formula of universal law for the categorical imperative: "*act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*" (G, 4: 421). By analogy with this first formulation of the categorical imperative, Kant derives the aforementioned formula of the law of nature: "*so act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a* UNIVERSAL LAW OF NATURE" (ibid.).

In order to show how a maxim should be tested to see whether it can be universalized, Kant puts forward four examples, the first of which concerns a perfect duty to oneself, namely self-preservation. Kant imagines the case of a man who, feeling weary of life "because of a series of ills [*Übeln*] that has grown to the point of hopelessness" (ibid.), asks himself whether it is contrary to a duty to oneself to take one's life. According to the test of universalizability the answer to this question depends on whether the man's maxim can be thought as a universal law of nature. Kant synthesizes this maxim as follows: "from self-love [*Selbstliebe*] I make it my principle to shorten my life if, when protracted any longer, it threatens more ill than it promises agreeableness" (G, 4: 422). The question is, therefore, whether this principle of self-love can become a universal law of nature. According to Kant,

this cannot be the case, for "a nature whose law it were to destroy life itself by means of the same sensation the function of which it is to impel towards the advancement of life, would contradict itself and would thus not subsist as a nature" (ibid.).[50] Thus, Kant concludes, the suicide's maxim fails the test of universalizability.

Natural law arguments, a classical formulation of which can be found in St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* (II, II, Q. 64, Art. 5),[51] have been the subject of strong criticism, particularly in the wake of Hume's refutation of this kind of arguments in his essay *On Suicide*.[52] The basic problem lying at the heart of natural law arguments can be best synthesized as follows: why should the fact that an action is contrary to a natural purpose or a natural law make the same action morally impermissible? Indeed, as Battin (1996: 47) points out, there are several human behaviours that we regard as "natural" and yet we tend to disapprove of:

> [S]tealing, intimidation, and outright aggression may be "natural" behaviors, and yet are severely discouraged. Arguments against suicide that hold that it is "unnatural" because it runs counter to ordinary human inclinations are inadequate as moral arguments against suicide; such arguments move from "is" to "ought," arguing that because human beings do generally attempt to remain alive rather than kill themselves, they ought always to do so.

Although different from traditional formulations in several regards, Kant's own articulation of this argument has had no better fortune. The judgement given by Herbert J. Paton, one of the most prominent Kant scholars, can be here regarded as paradigmatic. Paton (1947: 154) does not hesitate in defining the natural law argument as "the weakest of Kant's arguments," and conjectures that Kant answers negatively the question of whether the maxim of suicide is consistent with the formula of the law of nature precisely because he already assumes suicide to be wrong. As much as this may seem too harsh a judgement, it is undeniable that Kant's argument can be regarded as problematic in several regards.

To begin with, it should be pointed out that many difficulties derive from the fact that Kant introduces the formula of the law of nature abruptly, without much explanation, deriving it by a formal analogy with the formula of universal law. It is not clear why Kant offers this formulation.[53] As Mihailov (2013: 58) puts it, "[w]hat does the conformity with a law of nature inform[] from a normative perspective, especially for a philosopher who is a champion of the facts—norms distinction?"[54] Kant justifies the analogy between the two formulas of the categorical imperative by reason of a formal similarity: "the universality of the law according to which effects [*Wirkungen*] happen" (G, 4: 421). How this analogy should be exactly interpreted is, however, far from clear.[55] Furthermore, Kant does not clarify whether the laws of nature, to which he refers, are *causal* or *teleological* laws of nature.[56]

According to Paton (1947: 149), there is no doubt that Kant is not concerned with causal laws and that he appeals to teleological considerations. The analogy between nature and human nature would thus be based on the fact that purposiveness characterizes both the former and the latter. As Paton (*id.*: 151) puts it, "when we are asked to conceive a proposed maxim as a law of nature, we must conceive it as a teleological law of nature; for it is a maxim of *action*, and action as such (quite apart from moral considerations) is essentially purposive." As Korsgaard (1996a: 90–92) points out, the main problem of the teleological interpretation of the contradiction deriving from the universalization of the suicide's maxim is that, in order to be normatively binding, Kant's argument requires that the moral agent should have a previous commitment to the natural purpose in question. Without a rational argument that explains why one should be committed to such purpose, the moral duty to self-preservation based on teleological considerations loses its force.

To see this, let us suppose with Kant that there exists a sensation (self-love) whose natural purpose is to impel towards the furtherance of life. The problem with the suicide

case is that this same sensation is oriented towards the abolition of life, that is, against its natural purpose. The teleological system of nature resulting from the universalization of the suicide's maxim would be, thus, a self-contradictory system; for, as already mentioned, "a nature whose law it were to destroy life itself by means of the same sensation the function of which it is to impel towards the advancement of life, would contradict itself and would thus not subsist as a nature" (G, 4: 422). But, why should the suicide be committed to this natural purpose? As Korsgaard (1996a: 90) puts it,

> [i]f Kant's point were that the suicide cannot will the teleological system in question because *qua* teleological system it has a contradiction in it, Kant would simply be committed to the view that a rational being as such wills a well-functioning teleological system, regardless of whether he wills the purposes that it serves. But then it is hard to see how the argument can go through. This instinct would be malfunctioning with regard to *this* purpose, but nothing prevents the suicide from willing that both the instinct and its purpose be scrapped.

Besides these problems deriving from the teleological interpretation, it should be noted that Kant's argument remains unconvincing for other reasons. One of the main problems with the argument stems from the way in which Kant describes the suicide's maxim. In order to obtain the necessary contradiction stemming from the universalization of the maxim, Kant must necessarily presuppose that it is one and the same sensation (*Empfindung*)—namely, self-love—that impels towards both self-preservation and self-destruction. Kant is able to do this because he assumes that both sensations (the one that impels towards self-preservation and the one that impels towards self-destruction) can be subsumed under the same category: self-love. However, it suffices to call into question this assumption and replace the wide term "self-love" with more specific expressions—such as, for instance, "instinct of self-preservation" and "inclination to avoid harm"—to avoid the contradiction. For, in this case, the natural sensation that impels towards the furtherance of life differs from the one that impels towards the abolition of life. Furthermore, even if we accept Kant's use of the term "self-love," it could be argued that a nature would be self-contradictory *only if* it would assign to self-love both the functions of preserving and destroying life *at the same time*. In other words, there would be no contradiction in a nature in which self-love would have the function of preserving life during the time AB and of destroying it during the time BC.[57]

Two more considerations can be put forward. First, Kant's argument rests on the assumption that there exists a sensation or, to use a more common expression, an instinct, the function of which it is to impel towards self-preservation.[58] Needless to say, this is an assumption that is far from being self-evident, as the abundant secondary literature on this topic clearly shows.[59] Second, taken as an argument against the moral permissibility of suicide (and not as a guiding example of how to apply correctly the formula of the law of nature), Kant's *natural law argument* has a limited scope; for, at least so formulated, it is ineffective against all those kinds of suicides which are not motivated by self-love. In the case of unselfish suicides, for instance, no contradiction would arise from the universalization of the suicide's maxim (recall that the contradiction depends on the fact that, in Kant's example, it is *one and the same* sensation (self-love) that impels towards both self-preservation and self-destruction), so that there are no good reasons to suppose that a nature containing this altruistic principle would not subsist as a nature, unless proven so.

To conclude, it must be noted that, as Timmermann (2007: 81) points out, the maxim rejected in Kant's example is one that rests on inclination. We have already seen in the previous section that this is precisely the reason for which Kant is so strongly opposed to suicide in the Collins lectures. Indeed, in his view, the suicide follows his inclinations, instead of determining them through freedom, in accordance with the principle of reason. The argument against suicide from the *Groundwork* is based on similar, although perhaps less evident, reasons. To see this, it is necessary to mention briefly the background of this argument, which is constituted by Kant's view of happiness as a natural end subordinated to

reason. In the first section of the *Groundwork*, Kant assumes as a principle that nature works purposively in the distribution of its predispositions, that is, that the natural predispositions of each organized being are the most fitting and suitable for its ends. Given that nature has endowed man with practical reason, Kant argues that happiness cannot be his natural end—for if that had been the case, nature would have endowed man only with instinct (a more reliable and secure guidance than reason). Since reason is not sufficiently fit to guide the will reliably in relation to man's needs, and given that nature has yet endowed him with a practical reason meant to influence the will, Kant concludes that man's natural end is "to produce a *will that is good*" (G, 4: 396).[60] This means that "happiness *is* a natural end for humans, but only a subordinate one. The strife for happiness is a natural fact of human life, but it has to be put under the limiting conditions of morality" (Horn 2006: 47). Now, recall the example put forward by Kant in his discussion of the formula of the law of nature. The man from the example is willing to commit suicide because the furtherance of his life "threatens more ill than it promises agreeableness" (G, 4: 422). If the man took his life, he would subordinate his moral duty to happiness. By so doing, however, he would act contrary to his natural end, which is not to fulfil his needs and interests but rather to produce a good will.

2.3.2 The Disposition Argument

The second argument that Kant puts forward in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* to show that suicide is contrary to one's own moral duty is what can be called the *disposition argument*. To introduce this argument, it is necessary to take into consideration another formulation of the categorical imperative, namely the formula of the end in itself. As Kant famously puts it, "*[s]o act that you use humanity, in your own person as well as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means*" (G, 4: 429). The assumption on which this formulation of the categorical imperative rests is that "a human being and generally every rational being *exists* as an end in itself, *not merely as a means* for the discretionary use for this or that will, but must in all its actions, whether directed towards itself or also to other rational beings, always be considered *at the same time as an end*" (*id.*: 428). This assumption rests, in turn, on a second key assumption, namely that "morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself" (*id.*: 435). Being endowed with freedom and rationality, therefore, with the capacity to give himself a moral law, man exists as an end in itself.

In order to see whether the formula of the end in itself can be put into practice, Kant keeps to the four examples already used to test both the formula of universal law and the formula of the law of nature. As we have already seen, the first of these examples concerns a man who is contemplating to kill himself in order to escape from a troublesome condition. Whereas in the case of the formula of the law of nature the problem is to know whether the man's maxim can be thought as a universal law of nature, in the case of the formula of the end in itself the question that this man will ask himself is whether the action of taking one's life can be consistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself. According to Kant, this cannot be the case, for

> [i]f to escape from a troublesome condition he destroys himself, he makes use of a person, merely *as a means*, to preserving a bearable condition up to the end of life.[61] But a human being is not a thing, hence not something that can be used *merely* as a means, but must in all his actions always be considered as an end in itself. Thus the human being in my own person is not at my disposal, so as to maim, to corrupt, or to kill him. (*id.*: 429)

Kant's claim that "a human being is not a thing" is based on the distinction between objects and non-rational beings (plants and animals), on the one hand, and rational beings, on the other. According to Kant, the former have only a *relative* or *conditional* worth. This is because they derive their worth from their being an object of inclinations: if the inclinations

did not exist, objects and non-rational beings would not have any worth. Having only a relative or conditional worth, objects and non-rational beings are called *things* and can be used merely as a means. On the contrary, human beings, *qua* rational beings, have an *absolute* worth, that is, they are an end in themselves. Having an absolute worth, rational beings are called *persons* and cannot be used merely as a means. This necessarily limits our choices, with regard both to ourselves and to others.

One of the examples that Kant puts forward in order to test the formula of the end in itself concerns lying promises. According to Kant's explanation, when I make a lying promise to others, I treat another rational being merely as a means: "For the one I want to use for my purposes by such a promise cannot possibly agree to my way of proceeding with him and thus himself contain the end of this action" (*id.*: 430). This, however, goes against the categorical imperative that prescribes to treat every rational being "*always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means*" (*id.*: 429). Here, the particular emphasis put on "*never merely* [*bloß*] *as a means*" should not be overlooked. Indeed, it is important to note that the categorical imperative does not prohibit that a person be used as a means but rather that a person be used *merely* or *only* as a means, that is, with no regard to its being an end in itself. Kant himself clarifies this point in the following passage from the Collins lectures: "A person can, indeed, serve as a means for others, by his work, for example, but in such a way that he does not cease to exist as a person and an end. He who does something, whereby he cannot be an end, is using himself as a means, and treating his person as a thing" (LE, Collins 27: 343).

As mentioned, according to Kant, the absolute worth of every rational being necessarily limits our choices, with regard both to others (as in the case of a lying promise) and to ourselves. This means that the prohibition to use a person merely as a means concerns not only other rational beings but also ourselves. Examples of this kind abound in the *Lectures on Ethics*: a man who, for the sake of profit, lets himself be used in everything, like a ball, throws away his worth as a man (*id.*: 341); someone who barters his own freedom for cash acts contrary to his manhood (*id.*: 342); a person who lets himself be used as an object of sexual enjoyment, for money or any other purpose, throws away the worth of humanity, allowing himself to be used as a tool or a thing (ibid.). What these examples have in common is that they describe a use of oneself that is contrary to the absolute worth that every rational being has. Allowing themselves to be treated merely as a means, the men in these examples disregard the fact that a human being is a person, not a thing. By so doing, they act contrary to their moral duty and degrade their humanity.

Whereas in these cases it is easy to understand why the acts described earlier imply a degradation of humanity (self-imposed slavery or prostitution entails the use of one's own person merely as a means or a tool of another's ends), things get more complicated when we consider the case of a man willing to take his own life. Indeed, although in the *Lectures on Ethics* Kant considers "the offences against oneself that are called *crimina corporis* [crimes of the body]" (ibid.), especially suicide, to be analogous to the examples mentioned earlier—he argues that they are deemed indecent for the same reason, that is, because they dishonour the worth of humanity in one's own person, in that one allows oneself to be used as a tool—it is far from clear in which sense and why a suicide makes use of his own person *merely as a means*, as Kant puts it in the passage from the *Groundwork*.

As Wittwer (2001: 187–189) points out, Kant's argument rests on the analogy between the way one treats something or someone as a thing and the way a suicide treats himself by committing suicide. According to Wittwer, this analogy is deceptive, for when we treat something or someone as a thing, we do not attribute any will or ability to self-determination to it/him/her, that is, we do not consider it/him/her as a rational subject. Clearly, this is not the case of the suicide who kills himself in order to reach his *self-given* end.[62] In other words, if a man who takes his own life follows his will, so the argument goes, he cannot be treating himself like an object without a will. Thus, it would be wrong to claim that a suicide disposes of himself as a thing. A similar criticism is made by Cholbi (2011: 67), who

compares the case of a person who sells herself into slavery, typically treating herself as a thing, to the case of a person who commits suicide. According to Cholbi, whereas the former makes herself a tool of another person's happiness and denies herself her dignity, the latter (at least, someone who considers suicide thoughtfully and rationally) does not seem to make herself a tool of anyone's happiness, including her own, nor does she deny herself her dignity.

To clarify these objections, it may be helpful to consider the following three different cases: (1) *a* makes use of *b* merely as a means to reach the end *x* (for instance, *a* makes a lying promise to *b*); (2) *a* makes use of *a* merely as a means to *b*'s end (for instance, *a* sells himself into slavery to *b*); (3) *a* makes use of *a* merely as a means to *a*'s end (for instance, *a* takes his own life in order to escape from a troublesome condition). As one can see, whereas in the first case the relation is *transitive* (the subject and the object of the action are different), both in the second and in the third case the relation described is *reflexive* (the subject and the object of the action are the same).[63] However, whereas in the second case the person *a* makes use of herself as a means to the person *b*'s end, in the third case the person *a* disposes of herself in order to reach a self-given end, something which seems to exclude the possibility that she is treating herself as a thing.

In order to make sense of Kant's argument, one might be tempted to have recourse to the aforementioned distinction between *homo phaenomenon* and *homo noumenon*. Indeed, although Kant does not directly employ these terms in the passage in question from the *Groundwork*, he implicitly resorts to the same distinction in the final part of the book, when he considers the apparent contradiction existing between free will and natural necessity.[64] Moreover, in the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant explicitly claims that "suicide violates the law of the noumenon, and respect for the latter" (LE, Vigilantius 27: 594). The problem is, nonetheless, that, as already indicated, *homo phaenomenon* and *homo noumenon* should not be understood as two different metaphysical entities but rather as two different ways in which man views himself as a subject of duty.[65] That being the case, however, we would obtain once again a reflexive, not a transitive, relation, so that if it is one and the same person who is disposing of herself in order to reach a self-given end, it is difficult to see how that same person is supposed to treat herself *merely as a means*.

Part of the difficulty in understanding Kant's argument stems from the obscure terminology he employs in the aforementioned passage from the *Groundwork*. As a matter of fact, in order to indicate who or what is used merely as a means by the man who is contemplating self-murder, Kant makes use of three, different expressions: "a person [*einer Person*]," "a human being [*der Mensch*]," and "the human being in my own person [*den Menschen in meiner Person*]" (G, 4: 429). The way in which the categorical imperative is formulated in the formula of the end in itself makes clear, however, that what must not be used merely as a means is the "*humanity, in your own person* [*die Menschheit* […] *in deiner Person*]" (ibid.). Thus, when Kant introduces the first of the four examples, he asks whether the action of the self-murder can be consistent with "the idea of humanity, *as an end in itself*" (ibid.).

Now, as shown, the key feature of humanity is rationality and it is *qua* rational beings that human beings are ends in themselves. In Kant's view, this status imposes certain constraints on human actions. As Richard Dean (2009: 89) points out, Kant makes a distinction between *contingent* (or *subjective*) and *necessary* ends. Ends based on desires and feelings have only *relative* or *conditional* value. This means, among other things, that the end *x* cannot be satisfied if this implies the thwarting of the satisfaction of the more important contingent end *y* or, *a fortiori*, the sacrifice of the only necessary and unconditional end, that is, rational nature, from which derives the capacity for morality. In other words, one cannot choose "to place higher priority on contingent desires than on morality" (*id.*: 94). But this is precisely what the man from Kant's example would do, if he took his life. Indeed, his end is based on his contingent desire "to escape from a troublesome condition." The satisfaction of this subjective, sensible end would imply, however, the

disposal of his humanity, the key feature of which is rationality, merely as a means—a disposal that cannot be morally permitted. In other words, the man from Kant's example would "violate the demand of treating humanity as an objective end" by undermining or destroying it "for the sake of achieving desire-based ends" (ibid.). The key to Kant's argument, thus, lies not so much in whether the suicide's end is self-given but rather in the contingent, desire-based nature of the same end.

Here, two considerations can be put forward. In both arguments from the *Groundwork* (as well as in the *freedom argument*), Kant seems to lay much emphasis on the fact that the suicide's maxim rests on inclination. From this derives a clear dichotomy between sensuality and rationality. To put it bluntly: the suicide follows his inclinations and, in satisfying his desires, he sacrifices rationality. As already mentioned, this seems to be too reductive and polarized a view of suicide, which excludes the possibility that suicide might be committed as a consequence of a rational deliberation (although Kant would probably object here that there are simply no rational grounds that might justify suicide). This consideration brings with it the question of how Kant's *disposition argument* should be exactly interpreted. According to a first, more conservative interpretation, Kant's argument has a limited scope: its aim is not to put forward an absolute prohibition of suicide but only a prohibition of those suicides whose maxim rests on inclination. This would exclude other kinds of suicide, which are not motivated by one's desires or needs. According to a second, less conservative interpretation, Kant's intention is to put forward an absolute prohibition of suicide, based on the fact that to dispose of one's life inevitably means, *ipso facto*, to dispose of one's own humanity merely as a means. Given that humanity is an end in itself, this is, however, something which cannot be morally permitted. The idea behind this view is that every human being possesses something sacred, which has absolute worth, that can never be violated or disposed of. As will be shown, this is precisely the assumption on which Kant's last and seventh argument, the *morality argument*, is based.

A later version of the *disposition argument*, which is to be found in the lectures recorded by Vigilantius, shows that the second interpretation is as plausible as the first. In this version of the *disposition argument*, Kant puts the emphasis not so much on the fact that the one who takes his life uses his own person merely as a means but rather on the fact that there is a kind of hierarchical relation between the *phaenomenon* and the *noumenon*. As *phenomenon*, man can *never* have the authorization to dispose of the humanity in his own person:

> A man cannot dispose over his own substance, for he would then himself be master over his very personality, his *inner freedom*, or humanity in his own person. These, however, do not belong to him; he belongs to them, and as phenomenon is obligated to the noumenon. He is therefore not *dominus* over his personality, considered as an *objectum reale*. (LE, Vigilantius 27: 601)

The relation between the phenomenon and the noumenon is clarified by Kant in a previous passage by means of the technical distinction between *proprietarius* (owner) and *dominus* (master). According to Kant, we are the *proprietarius* of our body (we govern and rule over it) but we are not its *dominus* (we cannot treat it as *res nostra* (our own property)): the noumenon restrains here the phenomenon. From this follows that the principle "*homo est mancipium sui* [a man is his own possession]" is wrong, for "the *jus disponendi de re sua* [right to dispose of one's own] never holds in regard to the person." The correct principle is rather "*homo non est dominus sui ipsius, sed tantum proprietate gaudet* [a man is not master over himself, but enjoys a sort of proprietorship]" (*id.*: 601). Accordingly, man can never be allowed to dispose of himself.

2.3.3 The Subject of Duty Argument

A recurring element in Kant's discussion of suicide is the reference to the Stoics.[66] This reference is to be explained not only by Kant's "lifelong love of and respect for the ancient

Greek and Latin authors" (Seidler 1983: 429) but also by the fact that the Stoic position serves as counterpoint to his own. This can be clearly seen in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, where Kant introduces his sixth argument against suicide by contrast to the Stoic position. Kant mentions that the Stoic sage "thought it a prerogative of […] his personality to depart from life at his discretion (as from a smoke-filled room)[67] with peace of soul, free from the pressure of present or anticipated ills, because he could be of no more use in life" (MM 6: 422). Here, as in the Collins lectures (LE, Collins 27: 374), Kant is willing to recognize that this attitude is a mark of courage. However, he claims that "this strength of soul not to fear death and to know of something that man can value even more highly than his life" (ibid.) would have been better used to preserve life rather than to renounce it.

The allusion to "something that man can value even more highly than his life" is made explicit in the following passage, which follows directly after the reference to the Stoic position:

> Man cannot renounce his personality as long as he is a subject of duty [*so lange von Pflichten die Rede ist*], hence as long as he lives; and it is a contradiction that he should be authorized to withdraw from all obligation [*aller Verbindlichkeit*], that is, freely to act as if no authorization were needed for this action. To annihilate the subject of morality in one's own person is to root out the existence of morality itself from the world, as far as one can, even though morality is an end in itself. Consequently, disposing of oneself as a mere means to some discretionary end is debasing humanity in one's person (*homo noumenon),* to which man (*homo phaenomenon)* was nevertheless entrusted for preservation. (MM, 6: 422–423)

Kant's use of the logical connector "consequently [*mithin*]" in the final sentence may lead one to read this passage as containing just one single argument. On a closer scrutiny, however, it is possible to distinguish three different arguments, each of which corresponds to one sentence. I will call the first argument the *subject of duty argument*, and the second one the *morality argument*. The third argument is clearly a *disposition argument*, which has been already the focus of the previous section—therefore, it will be not necessary to dwell on it. In this section I will consider the subject of duty argument, leaving for the next section the analysis of the morality argument.

Kant begins the passage quoted earlier by pointing out a contradiction lying in the permission to take one's life. As we have already seen, this kind of argumentative strategy appears both in the Collins lectures, with regard to freedom, as well as in the *Groundwork*, with regard to the suicide maxim thought as a universal law of nature. This time the contradiction arises when we think of man as a subject of duty. According to Kant, as a rational being endowed with a self-legislating will, man, as long as he lives, is a subject of duty. To renounce one's personality, however, would mean to withdraw from all obligation. But this is something that man cannot have the authorization to do; for he cannot consistently be a subject of duty and at the same time be authorized to withdraw from all obligation.

David N. James (1999: 47) has drawn attention to the fact that "by suggesting that justified suicide requires a specific authorization, Kant is once again echoing the traditional view of Plato, the Stoics, and Augustine." This view is the so-called *divine command theory*, according to which an action (in this case, suicide) can be considered as morally permitted or justified if commanded by God. As we have seen, Kant alludes to the divine command theory not only in the Collins lectures, where he argues that human beings are stationed like sentries on earth by God and should not desert their posts unless God commends them to do so (LE, Collins 27: 375), but also in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, when he claims that suicide can be considered "even as a violation of duty to God, as man's abandoning the post assigned him in the world without having been called away from it" (MM 6: 422). Although these lines almost immediately precede Kant's subject of duty argument, it is important to recall that in the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant is considering the moral permissibility of

suicide only with regard to the duties to oneself (as Kant himself puts it, “the question is whether […] man is still bound to preserve his life simply by virtue of his quality as a person and whether he must acknowledge in this a duty (and indeed a strict duty) to himself”; MM, 6: 422). This means that the moral authorization required to justify suicide, to which Kant makes reference in the passage quoted earlier, is neither a divine authorization nor can it depend on the duties one has towards other human beings (Kant has set aside one’s duties to others) but can be only self-given according to what the moral law prescribes in regard to the duties to oneself. Thus, the question that needs to be asked here is: why cannot man give himself the moral authorization to take his life in regard to the duties that he has towards himself?

Kant’s argumentation can be summarized as follows: as long as he lives, man is a subject of duty (as we have seen, he has both duties to oneself and duties to others). The obvious precondition for the possibility to fulfil these duties is self-preservation; conversely, suicide implies the withdrawal from all obligation. In order to withdraw from all obligation, however, man needs a moral self-authorization. Yet, he cannot give himself this authorization, precisely because, *qua* rational being, he is a subject of duty, the fulfilment of which is possible only through self-preservation. Therefore, man cannot take his own life, or, as Kant puts it in the passage quoted earlier, he cannot renounce his personality, for this would mean to withdraw from all obligation.

The fact that each man has moral duties (both to oneself and to others) is admittedly a strong argument against the moral permissibility of suicide. Nonetheless, the key question here is whether man cannot withdraw from his obligations—and, therefore, commit suicide—*whatever* the situation he faces. Indeed, one might argue that there are limits to our obligations and to the amount of suffering that we can impose on ourselves for the sake of fulfilling our duties to ourselves and to others. Consider, for instance, the man from the *Groundwork* “who feels weary of life because of a series of ills that has grown to the point of hopelessness” (G, 4: 421). Suppose that, being “so far in possession of his reason” (*id*: 421–422), this man can still fulfil his duties to himself and to others. Should this man hopelessly go through unbearable suffering only in order to comply with his obligations? Kant leaves no doubt as to his position. As he writes in the section of *The Metaphysics of Morals* dedicated to the happiness of others, “adversity, pain, and want are great temptations to violate one’s duty”; still, “the end is not the subject’s happiness but his morality” (MM, 6: 388). A passage from the Vigilantius lectures is even more categorical: “nor the most excruciating pains and even irremediable bodily sufferings can give a man the authority to take his own life, to escape from anguish and enter earlier upon a hoped-for higher happiness” (LE, Vigilantius 27: 628).

Needless to say, nowadays this position may undeniably appear to many as too severe. Beyond this aspect, however, it is important to note that Kant’s view entails a categorical prohibition of suicide only if we suppose with Kant that man is a subject of duty *as long as he lives*. In other words, Kant is assuming that, as long as he lives, man is always able to fulfil his duties, that is, *whatever situation he faces*. Wittwer (2001: 202–203) has called into question this premise imagining the case of a man who suffers from an incurable and mortal illness that confines him to bed (thus making him completely dependent on assistance from others) and causes a painful decline of the body, while leaving the mind untouched.[68] Taking into consideration that Kant is considering suicide exclusively from the perspective of the duties to oneself, it seems that the only duty that this man still has is self-preservation. As Wittwer points out, the result is a highly paradoxical situation: this man is obligated to preserve himself because this is a necessary condition for the fulfilment of his duties. However, since the only duty to oneself left to him is self-preservation, this man “is obligated to preserve himself because this is a necessary condition to preserve himself!” (Wittwer 2001: 203).

The hypothetical case suggested by Wittwer can help us not only in showing the paradoxical character of Kant’s reasoning but also in pointing out a problem in the

argument. Recall that, according to Kant, man cannot renounce his personality, that is, he cannot withdraw from all obligation, for, as long as he lives, he is a subject of duty. That among these duties is a duty to oneself of self-preservation is, however, something that the argument is designed to establish (recall that the aim of the argument is to provide an answer to the question mentioned earlier of whether "man is still bound to preserve his life simply by virtue of his quality as a person and whether he must acknowledge in this a duty (and indeed a strict duty) to himself"; MM, 6: 422). This means that the existence of a duty of self-preservation cannot be the hidden premise of the argument but must rather be its conclusion. Keeping this in mind, let us consider again the man from Wittwer's example. Given the impossibility to fulfil his duties to oneself and to others, this man is bound to preserve his personality *only if* we presuppose that he has a duty of self-preservation (which would be the only duty to oneself that this man still has). However, as already mentioned, we cannot circularly presuppose what the argument is supposed to establish, namely the existence of a duty to oneself of self-preservation. Hence, in extreme cases such as the one described by Wittwer, Kant's *subject of duty argument* seems to fail to establish a prohibition of suicide.

2.3.4 The Morality Argument

Does Kant's *morality argument* do the job needed here for a categorical, universal prohibition of suicide? Recall the following argument: "To annihilate the subject of morality in one's own person is to root out the existence of morality itself from the world, as far as one can, even though morality is an end in itself" (MM, 6: 423). As we have seen, Kant considers that, as a rational and autonomous being able to act upon a self-given law, man is a subject of morality (he is bound by the moral law but he also binds other moral subjects). When he annihilates himself, man destroys the condition of the existence of morality, which exists in the world only through rational living beings, rooting it out from the world. However, morality is an end in itself and, *qua* end in itself, has an absolute worth. This means that it cannot be rooted out from the world. Therefore, since the annihilation of oneself entails the rooting out of morality from the world, suicide cannot be morally permitted.

A problematic aspect of this argument is that it is not clear how it is possible "to root out the existence of morality itself from the world." As David N. James (1999: 47–48) puts it,

> [i]f Kant is talking about the existence of morality itself, and not just the long-term commitments of a particular individual, then the premise [by killing oneself one is destroying a necessary condition of morality as it exists in the world] is simply false: Morality will survive any one individual's death. Morality itself is not mortal in any sense.

James' concern seems to be *prima facie* justified. Indeed, the use of the pronoun "*selbst*" after the noun "*Sittlichkeit*" in the German text seems to leave no doubt that Kant is not making reference to "the long-term commitments of a particular individual," to use James' expression but rather to morality *itself*. But as James rightly argues, the existence of morality itself in the world is obviously independent from any one individual's death. Kant, however, carefully specifies that the annihilation of the subject of morality in one's own person is tantamount to the rooting out of the existence of morality itself from the world "*so viel an ihm ist*," that is, as far as he (man) can. This addition is symptomatic. For Kant is not claiming that one single suicide can root out the existence of morality from the world (so that, *per absurdum*, morality will completely disappear from the world after it) but rather that man, by taking his life, annihilates that part of morality that is in him. As Elke E. Schmidt and Dieter Schönecker (2017: 157–158) put it,

> [m]orality is real; but it is real only *in* human beings. He, who takes his life, does not "annihilate" morality itself; for morality is real also in other human beings. But insofar

> as “morality” finds its realisation in human beings, the suicide “roots out” the moral laws “as far as he can”—insofar as they find realisation in him—“from the world.”

Besides the problematic character of Kant’s assumption that to commit suicide entails the rooting out of the existence of morality itself from the world, as far as one can,[69] it is important to note that the morality argument clearly shows how radical Kant’s consideration of the relation between morality and life is. As Wittwer (2001: 207) puts it, “life is at the service of pure practical reason, since the former constitutes a necessary condition for morality’s self-preservation.” In other words, if on the one hand Kant recognizes that human life is intrinsically valuable, on the other hand he thinks that this value is something *secondary* and *derivative* that implies a prior element, namely, morality. Accordingly, Kant establishes a *primacy of morality over life*. This means not only that man is not free to dispose of his own life when he so wishes (he cannot root out the existence of morality from the world) but more importantly that, should he be forced to choose between life and morality, priority must be given to the latter, as the following passage from the Collins lectures clearly shows:

> [T]here is much in the world that is far higher than life. The observance of morality is far higher. It is better to sacrifice life than to forfeit morality. It is not necessary to live, but it is necessary that, so long as we live, we do so honourably; but he who can no longer live honourably is no longer worthy to live at all. (Collins 27:373)[70]

As Battin (1996: 106) points out, Kant’s value-of-life view “assigns value not directly to human biological processes or the mental capacities associated with them, but to human *moral* life.”[71] In other words, human biological life is valuable insofar as it is the necessary condition for the realization of human moral life. This is why Kant accepts the possibility of sacrificing one’s life for the sake of morality, that is, for the sake of something which must be valued higher than mere biological life.[72] The most important implication following from this conception is that it is not clear how Kant’s concept of the intrinsic but derivative value of human life helps supporting the prohibition of suicide (or assisted suicide) in extreme cases such as the one described in the previous section, that is, where there still is biological life but the realization of *moral* life is made impossible by reason of sickness or physical inability. Indeed, once the latter is no longer possible, what is the reason to *unconditionally* preserve the former?[73]

The answer to this question largely depends on how we interpret Kant’s view of human dignity. As already mentioned, Kant leaves no doubt in the *Groundwork* that human dignity follows from the human being’s ability to act according to the moral law. As he puts it, “[m]orality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself, since only through this is it possible to be a lawgiving member in the kingdom of ends. Hence morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity” (4: 435). But if human dignity depends on the capacity for morality, how should we consider, for instance, those living human beings who are losing or have lost this capacity?[74] In her commentary to Cooley (2007a), Rosamond Rhodes (2007: 47) argues, for instance, that “the human life of dignity is not co-extensive with biological human life. Only during a portion of the life of some living organisms with human DNA is the organism capable of ‘autocracy of the human mind.’ Hence, only that portion of human life has dignity, only that portion is worthy of respect.” Needless to say, this claim is far from being uncontroversial. In a recent study on Kant’s conception of human dignity, Oliver Sensen, for instance, acknowledges that there is a tension within Kant’s text itself,[75] but he also points out that Kant puts forward a twofold conception of dignity: “*All* human beings are said to have dignity in virtue of freedom, but only one who uses his freedom in a certain way has the second form of dignity too” (Sensen 2011: 168). In other words, Kant’s conception of dignity would allow for two

stages: an initial one, common to all human beings, and a realized one, only common to those human beings who make a proper use of freedom.

Kant's claim in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (MM, 6: 436) that man "possesses an inalienable [*unverlierbare*] dignity (*dignitas interna*)" is of primary importance here. Indeed, much of the contemporary debate about the moral permissibility of suicide focuses precisely on the problem of whether under certain conditions human dignity can be considerably undermined. J. David Velleman (1999), for instance, argues that from a Kantian viewpoint suicide could be morally justified if unbearable pain has disintegrated the patient's person and undermined his dignity.[76] Other scholars have defended the idea that in some cases suicide might be not only compatible but even required for the preservation of our own dignity.[77] These views share a common premise: they admit the possibility that dignity might be in extreme cases undermined, deteriorated, or even destructed.[78]

Cholbi (2010: 495) has called into question this common premise by pointing out that "dignity is neither earned nor relinquished, according to Kant, and is not a function of cognition, self-control, physical independence, or any other factor associated with the common understanding of dignity."[79] According to Cholbi (ibid.), views that maintain that "dignity is a property that human beings can lose as a result of such conditions as pain, mental dysfunction, etc. (and that can be preserved or protected by means of suicide)" rely upon a more Aristotelian notion of dignity.[80] This suggests, Cholbi (2010: 496) concludes, that "there may be a plausible Aristotelian argument for prudential suicide on the grounds of loss of, or threat to, one's dignity. But there is no credibly Kantian argument resting on such a premise."

To circumvent this difficulty, it is certainly possible to point out with Wittwer (2001: 208) that Kant's notion of dignity is not the only one available to us.[81] Wittwer himself (ibid.), for instance, points out that Seneca considered the slow wasting away of a terminally ill person as incompatible with the dignity of a free man.[82] Similarly, in his analysis of moral life in the concentration camps, Tzvetan Todorov (1996: 61–65) points out how suicide, conceived as an act of self-determination, can be considered in extreme situations as the only way to preserve one's own dignity. For his part, Jean Améry (1999: 61), who went through the experience of the concentration camps, argues that "not to have to live […] becomes a commandment wherever dignity [*Dignität*] and liberty forbid abominable conditions to the anti-nature of a living toward death, of a life in *échec*. The subject decides for itself in full sovereignty." These examples clearly show that the concept of dignity can be thus construed so as to morally justify suicidal acts in specific situations. On the other hand, however, as long as we stick to Kant's notion of dignity, it seems that, for the reasons mentioned earlier, we cannot use this notion to support the moral permissibility of suicide in extreme cases in which there still is biological life but the realization of moral life is extremely difficult, if not impossible.

2.4 Concluding Remarks

In his study on the ethics of suicide, Cosculluela (1995: 64) argues that "any plausible moral theory must allow for obligatory suicide. The reason is that it is easy to construct examples in which it seems clear that a person is morally required to commit suicide." One can find similar construed examples in secondary literature on Kant's view of suicide.[83] These examples usually aim at showing that Kant's prohibition of suicide is not as dogmatic as one may believe and that his moral theory can be so read as to justify a right or even a duty to suicide in certain specific occasions. A detailed assessment of these examples is beyond the aim of this chapter. Nevertheless, two considerations can be put forward. First, it has been rightly pointed out that Kant seems to propose sometimes *ad hoc* examples. Tom L. Beauchamp (1989: 211) points out, for instance, that "Kant avoids treating cases in which a refusal [to being coerced to morally degrading acts] will lead to *degradation* (by rape, say) but *not to death*." In the *Lecture on Ethics* (LE, 27: 377), Kant is reported to having said

that, “if a man can preserve his life no otherwise than by dishonouring his humanity, he ought rather to sacrifice it.” Accordingly, how should we consider the case of a woman who is about to be raped and who faces only two alternatives: either sexual violation (and, thus, according to Kant, moral degradation) or suicide? Should we suppose that Kant would have probably considered this and related types of suicide as morally permitted, as both Cosculluela (1995: 40) and Battin (1996: 109) suggest? Or, would he have still argued against them? I will leave these questions open.

Second, although these examples can help us imagine possible situations which Kant did not consider and which could have possibly led him to soften his position on the moral impermissibility of suicide, we should not overlook the important distinction between what Kant *might* have written or said and what Kant *actually* wrote or said. We can certainly speculate on how Kant would have considered, for instance, the suicide of a scientist who, knowing how to manufacture a deadly pandemic virus which could threaten humanity’s existence, is tortured by a misanthropic madman who is both able to reproduce and willing to use the virus. On the other hand, however, we should always keep in mind that even in the *Anthropology* (7/Kant 2007b: 259), where Kant seems to sympathize with those “honor-loving men” who sought to forestall unjust execution by law through suicide, he claims that “suicide will always remain horrible” and that “by committing it the human being makes himself into a monster.” A passage from the *Vorarbeiten* (23: 405), quoted by Unna (2003: 457), seems to leave few doubts about Kant’s strict denial of the existence of a right to suicide: “NB. It is a duty to refrain from something to which man has no right. […] [H]e has no right to dispose of his life. […]—The duty to oneself is here unconditioned.”[84] It is precisely this inflexibility and rigidity that has led a number of Kantian scholars to search for a less strict alternative and to propose a modified Kantian view of suicide.

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Footnotes

1 See Cosculluela (1995: 39), James (1999), Cholbi (2000, 2010, 2015), Brassington (2006), Cooley (2006, 2007a, 2013, 2015), Rhodes (2007), and Harter (2011). See also Gregor (1963: 135–136) and Battin (1996: 108–112). On the other hand, for a reading of Kant as opposing suicide in all circumstances, see de Vleeschauwer (1966), Brandt (1975), Wittwer (2001), Unna (2003), and Schüssler (2012). Hill (1991: 85) ascribes to Kant a “rigoristic opposition to suicide.” He nonetheless finds Kant’s position untenable and claims that “the spirit of his idea of humanity as an end in itself [...] leads to a more tenable position.”

2 See, particularly, James (1999).

3 On this, see Langton (1992).

4 Cato the Younger or “Uticensis” (95–46 BC) was a Roman statesman and Stoic, known for his moral integrity. He was one of the defeated of the Great Roman Civil War (49–45 BC). Unwilling to live in a world governed by Caesar, whom he considered a tyrant, Cato decided to commit suicide, thus becoming a symbol of virtue.

5 See Battin (2006: 107), Cooley (2006: 333, 336; 2007a: 38; 2013: 367), and Harter (2011).

6 On this, see Seidler (1983 : 446).

7 The first three questions refer to the following historical figures: Curtius (hurling oneself to certain death to save one’s country), Seneca (killing oneself to preserve one’s honour), and Frederick the Great (carrying lethal poison in war to be able to commit suicide rather than be captured and forced to agree to conditions that would prove harmful to the state). The fourth question is about a man bitten by a mad dog, who prefers to take his life rather than cause harm to others. The fifth and final question concerns the moral permissibility of smallpox inoculation, which at that time could cause death.

8 See also Schüssler (2012: 77–81).

9 See Cooley (2006: 333; 2007a: 38–39; 2013: 367; 2015: 284). In his reply to Cooley’s paper (2007a) on a Kantian moral duty for the soon-to-be demented to commit suicide, Stephen R. Latham (2007: 50) draws the attention to Unna’s paper. Apparently, this reference has gone unobserved by Cooley.

10 See LE, Vigilantius 27: 603: “To destroy oneself, therefore, through an act voluntarily undertaken by the sensory being, can never be permitted, so that a suicide (*autocheiria*) can never, under any circumstances, be regarded as allowable. Suppose, if you will, such cases as that of a slave, for example, who should lose his life in consequence of an attempted but abortive bid for freedom; or that one bitten by a mad dog should feel quite plainly the effects of madness; can either of them take his own life? The first considers a life of slavery to be no such life as is suited to

humanity; the second foresees his own death, and the possibility, likewise, of harming others through his urge to bite. Nevertheless, they both frustrate all attempts whereby they might be freed from their unhappy condition and are preserved from harm, e.g., by having themselves tied up at the appropriate time; quite recently a remedy for the mad dog's bite has been found, in administering oil to the victim internally, and trying to anoint him completely on the outside."

11 As a general rule, I have personally translated all citations in languages other than English.

12 I acknowledge my mistake in Stellino (2015: 98, n. 48; due to an unfortunate misunderstanding with the publisher, this article was not published in its final and revised version). According to Schmidt and Schönecker (2017: 164–165), "The crucial point of [Kant's] casuistry is not the question whether there are exceptions to the rule, that is, whether suicide 'in specific cases' can be permitted, but rather whether concrete cases of self-*disembodiment* [Selbst*entleibung*] entail self-*murder* [Selbst*mord*]."

13 See G, 4: 421–422, 429; CPrR, 5: 44; MM, 6: 422–424; LE, 27: 190–192, 208–210, 342–347, 369–378, 601–603, 627–630; NF 6801, 19: 165–166. See also § 77 of the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (7: 258–259).

14 This term was coined after Nietzsche's "free death" (*freier Tod*). On this, see Sect. 4.2 of this book.

15 *Mord* means "murder", (*er*)*morden* means "to murder." *Selbstmord* literally means "self-murder."

16 See Daube (1972: 429–430).

17 On the distinction between running (*gerathen*) and wilfully venturing (*begeben*) into danger of death, see Unna (2003: 469).

18 Battin rightly points out that Kant construes the case so that being killed is the only apparent alternative to moral degradation caused by rape. "Suppose, however," Battin writes, "that the woman's assailant did not threaten to kill her: The possible alternatives in this situation are now only consent, or forcible subjection to rape. Provided the assailant is physically stronger than she, he can impose sexual violation (and, thus, Kant holds, moral degradation) upon her without killing her. The choice to let herself be killed is not an option" (Battin 1996: 109). Battin suggests that, in this case, Kant's theory may permit suicide. For a similar criticism, see Beauchamp (1989: 211) and Cooley (2006: 336–337). On this, see note 72.

19 According to de Vleeschauwer (1966: 260), there are only three different versions of just one main argument, whereas in Cholbi's opinion (2000: 159) Kant offers "three distinct lines of argument against suicide." Quoting Cooley (2007a: 38), Robert Sharp (2012: 232) affirms that "Kant's arguments against suicide actually fall into two categories." Similarly, Schmidt and Schönecker (2017: 135) identify two different reasons for which Kant opposes suicide.

20 I here follow Wittwer (2001: 182).

21 As Cholbi (2011: 62) points out, "according to the role responsibilities argument, suicide is an indirect wrong, in that it makes impossible for a person to fulfil the moral responsibilities she has toward specific other individuals." Consider, for instance, the following passage from Voltaire's *Zadig or, Destiny* where a soldier who has lost his mistress decides not to take his life precisely because of his moral responsibilities towards his mother: "Then he [the chief satrap] introduced a soldier, who in the Hyrcanian war had given a still nobler example of generosity. Some of the enemy's troops were laying hands on his mistress, and he was defending her from them, when he was told that another party of Hyrcanians, a few paces off, were carrying away his mother. With tears he left his mistress, and ran to rescue his mother; and when he returned to the object of his love, he found her dying. He was on the point of slaying himself, but when his mother pointed out that she had no one but him to whom she could look for succour, he was courageous enough to endure to live on" (Voltaire 1907: 68).

22 For a defence of Kantian duties to oneself, see Paton (1990), Denis (1997), and Timmermann (2006).

23 See also LE, Collins 27: 341: “So far from these duties [duties to oneself] being the lowest, they actually take first place, and are the most important of all; for even without first explaining what self-regarding duty is, we may ask how, if a man degrades his own person, anything else can be demanded of him? He who violates duties toward himself, throws away his humanity, and is no longer in a position to perform duties to others. […] [T]he infringement of self-regarding duties takes all his worth from a man, and the infringement of duties to others deprives him of worth only in that respect. Hence *the former are the condition under which the others can be observed*.” (my italics)

24 Kant’s use of the word *Wesen* might suggest that the natural being and the intelligible being are two distinct metaphysical entities belonging respectively to the phenomenal and noumenal world. As Wood (2008: 172) points out, however, “to understand the distinction here with the ‘two worlds’ metaphysical baggage would make no sense. The point is rather that as a subject of obligations to myself I think of myself as an empirical agent, while when I think of myself as the being to whom the obligation is owed I bring myself under a moral idea grounded on an *a priori* moral principle. No noumenal metaphysics is needed for that distinction.”

25 See Kuehn (2015: 51). The notes recorded by Vigilantius, also quoted in this chapter, date instead from 1793/94. For an overview of the chronology of the notes on moral philosophy, see the very useful web page *Kant in the Classroom*: https://users.manchester.edu/FacStaff/SSNaragon/Kant/Home/index.htm (accessed 7 April 2020).

26 See also Kuehn (2015: 54): “The Collins lectures cover only the material of the second part of the *Metaphysics of Morals*. It is, however, surprising how closely the content of the ‘*Ethica*’ in the Collins notes correspond to the book that appeared in 1797, that is, more than twenty years later.”

27 See also Schneewind (1997: xxii): “Kant disagreed with Baumgarten on many fundamental philosophical matters, as well as on various points of morality. […] Although Kant sometimes summarized his ‘Author,’ he far more often criticized him or simply presented his own views instead.”

28 See Plato’s *Phaedo* (62b-c/Plato 1997).

29 This is the so-called divine calling used by Socrates in order to justify his suicide (see *Phaedo*, 62c).

30 De Vleeschauwer (1966: 263–264) calls attention to the similarity between Kant’s military expressions and the words used by Saint-Preux in Rousseau’s *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1997: 311): “They consider man living on earth as a soldier on sentry duty. God, they say, has placed you in this world, why do you quit it without his leave?”

31 See Cosculluela (1995: 14–19), Battin (1996: 31–41), and Cholbi (2011: 45–53).

32 As will be shown, one of the reasons for which Kant considers suicide as morally impermissible is precisely the fact that, by taking his own life, man disposes of him as a thing, thus debasing humanity in his own person (see the *disposition argument* in Sect. 2.3.2).

33 *Gemächsel* literally means “artefact.”

34 For a detailed analysis of Kant’s theory of property, see Gregor (1988).

35 See LE, Collins 27: 307: “All religion presupposes morality; hence this morality cannot be derived from religion.” In this, Kant fundamentally disagrees with Baumgarten (see Bacin 2015: 24–29).

36 See also LE, Collins 27: 342–343.

37 See Plato’s *Euthyphro* (10a): “Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?” See also Kuehn (2015: 62).

38 Kant’s assumption that he who commits suicide utterly fails to respect his life is obviously questionable. Indeed, there is little doubt that many individuals decide to take their lives precisely because of the respect they hold for their own lives. On this, see Sect. 2.3.4 of this book.

39 More than twenty years have passed since Battin wrote her book and things have not changed. Indeed, this argument is almost universally ignored by secondary literature. A rare exception is represented by Wittwer (2001 and 2003).

40 According to the definition given by Marieke Liem (2010: 153), “homicide-suicide is a generic term referring to a homicide and a subsequent suicide by the same actor.”

41 The Columbine High School shooting occurred on 20 April 1999 at Columbine High School, Colorado. The shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold (respectively aged 18 and 17) killed 13 people and injured 24 others. They subsequently committed suicide.

42 See Eliason (2009) and Liem (2010).

43 I here consider the conservative rate of 0.05 homicide-suicides per 100.000 persons.

44 See, for instance, Doerflinger (1989: 16) and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2011: 4).

45 It is precisely in this sense that, in the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche uses the adjective “free” (German: *frei*) in order to characterize his conception of voluntary death.

46 See Doerflinger (1989: 17).

47 Another way of arguing against the possibility of interpreting the self-contradiction of freedom as a logical contradiction would be to introduce the distinction between logical opposite (*contradictorie oppositum*) and real opposite (*contrarie s. realiter oppositum*) mentioned in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant, 6: 384; see also the 1763 pre-critical writing *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy*). *Qua* vice, suicide is opposed to virtue as its real opposite, not as its logical opposite. I owe this remark to Lorena Cebolla Sanahuja.

48 See Guyer (2015: 187).

49 To clarify why suicide breaks the supreme rule, Kant puts forward two analogous examples: “if I have drunk too much today, I am incapable of making use of my freedom and my powers; or if I do away with myself, I likewise deprive myself of the ability to use them” (LE, Collins 27: 346). In both cases, Kant claims, freedom is used in a self-contradictory way. It might be argued that the two examples put forward by Kant are disanalogous exactly in the same way as the two cases mentioned earlier (the man who commits suicide and the man who decides to become a slave) are. Indeed, whereas a drunkard makes use of his freedom to (temporarily) abolish freedom and, as a

consequence, lives as a man deprived of freedom (as long as he is drunk), the man who commits suicide makes use of freedom in order to put an end to his life. To that extent, he ceases to exist. But since he is dead, he has no possibility of depriving himself of the ability to use freedom. However, even in this case Kant seems to understand the contradiction not in logical but in teleological terms. Accordingly, the suicide would deprive himself of the ability to use his freedom and his powers because he follows his inclinations and, thus, makes use of his freedom in a way that is inconsistent with its natural purpose—exactly in the same way as the drunkard does.

50 See CPrR, 5: 44: "Similarly, the maxim that I adopt with respect to disposing freely of my life is at once determined when I ask myself what it would have to be in order that a nature should maintain itself in accordance with such a law. It is obvious that in such a nature no one could end his life *at will*, for such an arrangement would not be an enduring natural order."

51 See Aquinas (2007: 1463): "Everything naturally loves itself, the result being that everything naturally keeps itself in being, and resists corruptions so far as it can. Wherefore suicide is contrary to the inclination of nature, and to charity whereby every man should love himself. Hence suicide is always a mortal sin, as being contrary to the natural law and to charity."

52 See Hume (1996).

53 According to Timmermann (2007: 78–79), "the target of the first variant formulation is easily identified. It is the Stoic idea that a morally good life is a life in harmony with nature, which was still popular with philosophers like Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and Christian Garve, whose annotated translation of Cicero's *De officiis*, published in 1783, is said to have inspired Kant to write the *Groundwork*."

54 For a reading of Kant's *natural law argument* as naturalistically fallacious, see Brassington (2006: 572). On the erroneous conflation of the Humean is/ought problem and Moore's naturalistic fallacy, see Joyce (2006: 146–152).

55 On this, see Mihailov (2013).

56 According to Wittwer, in both cases the analogy between the two formulas would be problematic. See Wittwer (2003: 125–128, 154–165).

57 See Paton (1947: 154; my italics): "Why should it not be a merciful dispensation of Providence that the same instinct which ordinarily leads to life might lead to death *when* life offered nothing but continuous pain?" See also Cosculluela (1995: 33–34).

58 See also MM, 6: 420 ("There are impulses of nature having to do with man's *animality*. Through them nature aims at a) his self-preservation") and MM, 6: 424 ("love of life is destined by nature to preserve the person").

59 See, among others, Battin (1996: 45–46), Wittwer (2003: 360–368), and Cholbi (2011: 43–44).

60 On the several questions arising from Kant's teleological view, see Horn (2006). As Horn points out, the fact that Kant develops an account of the teleology of human nature "is surprising since Kant, at least in his 'critical period', is well known as a philosopher who rejects traditional teleological claims, in particular the famous teleological argument for God's existence" (*id.*: 45).

61 This claim is somewhat puzzling. For if the would-be suicide destroys himself, by putting an end to his life, how can his will be that of "preserving a bearable condition up to the end of life [*zu Erhaltung eines erträglichen Zustandes bis zu Ende des Lebens*]"?

62 See also Cosculluela (1995: 37): “In committing suicide, one carries out one’s own intentions. It is hard to see how carrying out one’s own intentions could involve using oneself merely as a means.”

63 See Wittwer (2001: 188).

64 See G, 4: 456: “we think [of] a human being in a different sense and relation when we call him free from when we take him, as a piece of nature, to be subject to its laws, and that both not only *can* very well coexist, but also must be thought *as necessarily united* in the same subject.” See also CPrR, 5: 99–103, more specifically CPrR, 5: 100, where Kant distinguishes between “the intelligible subject [*das intelligibele Subject*]” and the “subject also belonging to the sensible world [*Subject, das auch zur Sinnenwelt gehörig*].”

65 See note 24.

66 On this, see Seidler (1983) and James (1999). For an analysis of the Stoic view of suicide, see Rist (1977: 233–255).

67 See Epictetus (*Discourses* I, XXV, 18/Epictetus 1956). See also Marcus Aurelius (*Meds.*, V, 29/Marcus Aurelius 2002).

68 As uncommon and rare this case might be, it is not impossible. In a footnote, Wittwer (2001: 202, n. 36) mentions the case of Noel Earley, a 48-year-old man who suffered from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. As the web page of the ALS association explains, “the progressive degeneration of the motor neurons in ALS eventually leads to their demise. When the motor neurons die, the ability of the brain to initiate and control muscle movement is lost. With voluntary muscle action progressively affected, people may lose the ability to speak, eat, move and breathe.” See http://www.alsa.org/about-als/what-is-als.html (accessed 10 April 2020).

69 On this, see also the objection advanced by Cooley (2015: 297). In order to show that there is no inconsistency with killing the body to preserve the moral agent, Cooley points out that, according to Kant’s ontological view of the soul, “the moral agent does not end with her suicide” (the reference is to the immortality of the soul as a postulate of pure practical reason; see CPrR, 5: 122–124).

70 See, particularly, the section “Of Care for One’s Life” in the Collins lectures (LE, Collins 27: 375–378).

71 See Altman (2011: 99): “Kant is no vitalist; he does not value life simply for its own sake.” See also Hill (1991: 93, n. 5).

72 Note that the sacrifice of one’s life for the sake of morality neither contradicts Kant’s prohibition of suicide (as mentioned earlier, Kant carefully distinguishes between a suicide and a victim of fate) nor implies the moral justification of suicides committed in order to achieve morally good ends. According to Cholbi (2000: 169), for Kant, “there is no wrong in submitting to what we might call ‘indirect’ or ‘passive’ suicide” for moral reasons. To support his claim, Cholbi quotes the following passage from the Collins lectures: “If I cannot preserve my life except by violating my duties toward myself, I am bound to sacrifice my life rather than violate these duties” (LE, Collins 27: 372; Cholbi quotes Louis Infield’s translation of Kant’s *Lectures on Ethics*). In reality, in this passage, Kant is not justifying suicide for moral reasons but is rather arguing that the preservation of life is of subordinate value when compared with the observance of morality. As a matter of fact, the passage quoted by Cholbi continues as follows: “But suicide is in no circumstances permissible.” According to Cholbi (2011: 66), it is also not clear how unselfish suicides (as, for instance, those in which the suicidal individual sacrifices her life in order to save another human being’s life) should be considered from a Kantian perspective. Kant’s consideration of Curtius’ case (LE, Vigilantius 27: 629) seems to indicate, however, that unselfish suicides constitute no exception to his strict prohibition of suicide. On this, see Unna (2003: 459, 472). See also Ho (2010: 372–375).

73 Battin (1996: 112) goes as far as arguing that “Kant’s theory might be read to permit or even to require preemptive suicide for those who are ill or approaching old age, if there is reason to think that physical or mental infirmity will diminish their adherence to the moral law—a risk presumably especially great in diseases which involve progressive mental deterioration.”

74 On the question of who or what counts as a moral agent, see Chap. 10 of Altman (2011).

75 See Sensen (2011: 53–54): “On the one hand, Kant seems to be saying that all human beings as such are ends in themselves and should be respected (see *GMS* 4:428; *TL* 6:463). On the other hand, he says that morality is the condition for something’s being an end in itself (see *GMS* 4:435), and that only a morally good will has an absolute value (see e.g. *GMS* 4:393).”

76 For a criticism of Velleman’s position, see Cholbi 2010.

77 See Wood (2008: 172): “it is equally true that in other cases suicide might be not only compatible with the preservation of our own dignity but even required by its preservation—as when we face the prospect of a life deprived (by disease or by mistreatment by others) of the conditions under which our human dignity can be maintained.” According to Wood (2008: 173), “suicide is a topic on which […] the position Kantian ethics should take is quite distinct from (in many cases diametrically opposed to) the position Kant himself takes.” Compare with what Korsgaard writes in her *The Sources of Normativity*: “The ravages of severe illness, disability, and pain can shatter your identity by destroying its physical basis, obliterating memory or making self-command impossible. Suicide, in such cases, may be the only way to preserve your identity, and to protect the values for which you have lived” (Korsgaard 1996b: 162). See also Brassington (2006: 573): “Kant’s denial of the permissibility of suicide is found wanting; this leaves the way clear for an argument for the permissibility of suicide on the basis of appeals to autonomy (which is also founded in our intelligible sides). There need be no clash between respect for autonomy and absolute inner worth, and it would, in fairness, be surprising if there were a clash—the two are, after all, ways of making sense of the same noumenal characteristic.”

78 As Velleman (1999: 616–617) points out, “the phrase ‘dying with dignity’ is potentially misleading. We don’t think that a person’s death is morally acceptable so long as he can carry it off with dignity. Rather, we think that a person’s death is acceptable if he can no longer live with dignity. The operative concept is undignified life, not dignified death.”

79 In his paper Cholbi refers to Gentzler (2003: 463), who argues that “on Kant’s view, the autonomous nature which serves as the basis for our dignity is not empirically manifest: we can know *a priori* that it is something that we all necessarily possess as long as we are alive. […] Since this capacity remains whether or not it is exercised, Kantian human dignity cannot be earned and cannot be taken away. Since all human beings, as such, possess the same capacity for autonomous action, all human beings have equal dignity.”

80 See Gentzler (2003: 475–480).

81 For a survey of the history and meaning of the concept of dignity, see Rosen (2012).

82 Wittwer makes reference to the letter 77 of Seneca’s *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*.

83 See, particularly, Cooley (2006, 2007a).

84 My translation.

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3. Arthur Schopenhauer: The Metaphysical Futility of Suicide

Paolo Stellino[1] ✉
(1) Nova Institute of Philosophy, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, LISBOA, Portugal

✉ **Paolo Stellino**
Email: paolo.stellino@fcsh.unl.pt

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Compared to Kant, Schopenhauer is certainly a less prominent figure in contemporary philosophy of suicide. Secondary literature on Schopenhauer on suicide is less voluminous than that on Kant, and whereas the latter remains one of the key reference points of the contemporary debate both on suicide and euthanasia, it would be quite awkward (although not impossible) for a contemporary author to propose a defence of the prohibition of suicide based on Schopenhauer's metaphysics. Yet, Schopenhauer is among the philosophers who gave most importance to the topic of suicide: one of the last sections of *The World as Will and Representation* (§69) is entirely dedicated to "the voluntary abolition of the individual appearance of the will" (WWR I/Schopenhauer 2010: 471), and *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Schopenhauer's collection of philosophical essays, contains an essay specifically devoted to suicide (chapter XIII, *On Suicide*). In addition, several remarks on this subject can be found in the prize essay *On the Basis of Morals*, in some chapters of the *Supplements* to *The World as Will and Representation*, in the *Manuscript Remains*, as well as in the *Lecture on Universal Philosophy*.[1] The topic of suicide recurs so often in Schopenhauer's writings that, in his book dedicated to his philosophy, Dale Jacquette (2005: 140) has even defined Schopenhauer's attention to this question as "disproportionate."

One of the reasons for which contemporary philosophers of suicide have given less attention to Schopenhauer is that his opposition to suicide presupposes his very peculiar metaphysical worldview. As Cosculluela (1995: 114) plainly puts it, "[r]arely has a philosopher launched so metaphysical a critique of the rationality of any action. Schopenhauer's critique of the rationality of suicide can only appeal to those who accept his bizarre ontology, which conceives reality as it is in itself (the thing-in-itself) as a cosmic will." Although Cosculluela is right in pointing out the limited interest of Schopenhauer's critique of the rationality of suicide for contemporary readers, it must be said that Schopenhauer's confrontation with suicide cannot be reduced to his argument for the futility of suicide based on metaphysical grounds. As a matter of fact, amongst many other interesting elements and aspects one can find in Schopenhauer's writings a kind of psychology and phenomenology of suicide, a refutation of the Stoic, the Christian, and Kant's approach to suicide, an examination of the ascetic's suicide, and a defence of one's indisputable right over one's own person and life. Furthermore, Schopenhauer relates the topic of suicide to a number of existential (or proto-existentialist) issues such as the human condition, the meaning of life, the human awareness of death, and the value of existence. He also considers suicide from the specific viewpoint of the relation between the will and the intellect. All these aspects contribute to make Schopenhauer's confrontation with suicide more appealing and worthy of attention than one might expect.[2]

Besides these aspects, Schopenhauer's stance on suicide also exemplarily shows that a pessimistic worldview does not necessarily go hand in hand with a pro-attitude towards suicide. Indeed, if suffering is so essential to all life and if every release from pain is only temporary and always followed with a new pain—so that it would have been better not to have been born, as Schopenhauer and many other pessimists claim—then one might think that suicide is the best option for the human being and that the pessimist should endorse this option. Here Mainländer's case comes to mind. Philipp Mainländer, whose real name was Philipp Batz, was nineteen years old when he discovered *The World as Will and Representation*. Like Nietzsche, he was completely struck by the reading of Schopenhauer's major work. Sixteen years later, having written the second volume of his philosophical work *Philosophie der Erlösung* (*Philosophy of Redemption*[3]), in which he presented his pessimistic worldview, Mainländer hanged himself in his room. As Frederick C. Beiser (2016: 201) remarks, "in a pessimistic age, Batz was perhaps the most radical pessimist of them all."[4]

In reality, whether because the other pessimists lacked his radicalism or simply because their doctrines were based on different premises, Mainländer was one of the few pessimists who was favourable to suicide. Eduard von Hartmann, the author of the very successful book *Philosophie des Unbewussten* (*Philosophy of the Unconscious*, 1869), which made him the most famous pessimist of his age,[5] considered, for instance, that suicide was the expression of immoral egoism:

> In the suicide and in the ascetic the self-denial is as little deserving of admiration as in the sick person who, to escape the prospect of a perpetual toothache, reasonably prefers the painful drawing of the tooth. In both cases there is only well-calculated egoism without any ethical value; rather an egoism that in all such situations of life is immoral, save when the possibility of fulfilling one's duties to one's relatives and society is entirely cut off. (Hartmann 1884: 100)

Schopenhauer, for his part, shared Mainländer's sympathetic attitude to desperate people who commit suicide but, as will be shown, he thought that suicide was not only self-contradictory but also futile. In his study on pessimism, Joshua Foa Dienstag (2006: 37) even goes so far as to maintain that

> [n]o pessimist recommends suicide (though Leopardi comes close on various occasions). Several do recommend something similar: a withdrawal from life into a hermitage of inactivity and (depending on the writer) pure thought or pure sensation. But others, Camus prominent among them, have found that their pessimism issues in an embrace of a vigorous and active life, one committed to political participation.

As these examples show, it would be simply wrong to assume that a favourable attitude to suicide logically follows from pessimism.

For Schopenhauer suicide is no permanent solution to the problem of human suffering, nor does it lead to salvation. This does not mean, however, that he can be numbered among the philosophers who strictly oppose suicide. First, it should not be forgotten that Schopenhauer favourably considers a particular form of suicide, namely death by voluntary starvation. Furthermore, unlike Kant, whose claims on suicide are often very derogatory (recall, for instance, Kant's definition of suicide as "the most abominable of the crimes that inspire horror and hatred"; LE, Collins 27/Kant 1997: 347), Schopenhauer often shows in his writings a sympathetic attitude towards this act. One of the aims of his essay *On Suicide* is precisely to dismiss some of the common prejudices or false beliefs concerning suicide, which are supposed truths usually taken for granted. Thus, he rejects as mere "absurdities" (PP II/Schopenhauer 2015: 276) the belief that suicide is the greatest cowardice or that it is possible only in madness. He also claims that the reasons put forward by the clergy to

condemn suicide are untenable: they are not able to point to any biblical authority and their philosophical arguments are not valid.

Most of all, Schopenhauer seems to severely criticize the bigotry of those who morally condemn suicide as a wrong act and consider those who commit it as criminals. Schopenhauer, who actually was a convinced Anglophile, specifically refers to the "vulgar bigoted England," where at the time suicides were given ignominious burials and their legacies were confiscated.[6] Against the habit of considering suicide as a crime, Schopenhauer says that we should let our moral feeling judge:

> Let us try for the time being to allow our moral feelings to decide on this matter, and compare the impression on us of the news that an acquaintance has committed a crime, say murder, cruelty, fraud or theft, with the news of his voluntary death. Whereas the former occasions lively indignation, supreme resentment, and calls for punishment or revenge, the latter arouses sorrow and compassion often mixed with a certain admiration for his courage, rather than the moral disapproval which accompanies a bad action. Who has not had acquaintances, friends, relatives who have voluntarily departed this world? And everyone is supposed to think of them with revulsion, as criminals? I say no and no again [*Nego ac pernego*]! (ibid.)

It is difficult not to see in the question "who has not had acquaintances, friends, relatives who have voluntarily departed this world?" an allusion to Schopenhauer's personal experience. Indeed, when he was only seventeen years old, the body of his father Heinrich Floris, who suffered from depression, was found floating in an icy canal behind the family compound. It was 20 April 1805. As David E. Cartwright (2010: 88) reports in his Schopenhauer biography, "both Johanna [Schopenhauer's mother] and Arthur viewed his death as a suicide, although it was possible that instead of jumping out of the warehouse loft, he may have fallen." The official version given to the public was nonetheless different. Four days after her husband's death, Johanna published the following notification: "I hereby do my sad duty to announce to my relatives and friends the death of my husband, Mr. Heinrich Floris Schopenhauer, which was caused by an unfortunate accident" (*id.*: 94). Be that as it may, the son was devastated by his father's death (*id.*: 88).

It was probably the painful memory of his father's death, together with the awareness that his own tendencies towards depression, anxiety, and melancholy descended from his father (*id.*: 4)—in the *Supplements* to *The World as Will and Representation* Schopenhauer claims that "most heritable of all is the tendency to suicide" (WWR II/Schopenhauer 2018: 537)—that led Schopenhauer to look with a benevolent eye upon those who committed suicide.[7] This compassionate attitude makes his approach to suicide very peculiar: indeed, if on the one hand Schopenhauer affirms that "quite obviously there is nothing in the world to which everyone has such an indisputable *right* as his own person and life" (PP II/Schopenhauer 2015: 276), on the other, however, he considers suicide to be not only a self-contradictory act but also "a vain, futile and foolish action" (MR I: 437/Schopenhauer 1988–1990). As will be shown in what follows, this apparent contradiction derives from Schopenhauer's *twofold approach to suicide*.

Before we proceed to the analysis, however, a clarification on Schopenhauer's use of the word "suicide" is needed. Besides three occurrences of the term *Selbsttödtung* and two of the expression *freiwilliger Tod*, all of them contained in the essay *On Suicide*, the German word used by Schopenhauer to refer to the act of self-killing is *Selbstmord*. This may come as a surprise given that, as we have already seen in the previous chapter, this term literally means "self-murder" and emphasizes the fact that the one who is taking his or her own life is committing a crime. If Schopenhauer did not consider suicide to be a crime, why did he not avoid this term? This choice most probably derives from the simple fact that *Selbstmord* was the noun commonly used at Schopenhauer's time in order to refer to the act of self-killing. It seems, therefore, reasonable to conclude that he employed this term not because of its pejorative connotation but merely because of the linguistic habit of his age.

There is another aspect of Schopenhauer's approach that should be emphasized: his definition of suicide makes sense only within his metaphysical worldview. In section 69 of *The World as Will and Representation*, suicide is defined as "the voluntary abolition [*wirkliche Aufhebung*] of the individual appearance of the will" (WWR I: 425) as well as "the wilful destruction [*willkürliche Zerstörung*] of one single appearance" (*id.*: 426). These definitions will become clear as soon as we explore Schopenhauer's metaphysical worldview. For the moment, some indications can be derived from the comparison with Kant. As we have seen in the previous chapter, for Kant two conditions are necessary for an act of suicide: (1) the direct and wilful intention of ending one's own life, and (2) that one be the author of one's own death. Whereas Schopenhauer seems to take the second condition for granted, he puts much emphasis on the first condition. In the same section of *The World as Will and Representation*, for instance, he describes suicide as "a phenomenon of a strong affirmation of will" (WWR I: 425). This is not surprising, since his argument against suicide is precisely based on the alleged contradiction existing in the fact that the person who commits suicide denies life because he wills life. What is probably more surprising is that even death by starvation, which is characterized by a suspension of willing, is described by him as "*freiwillig gewählt*," that is, voluntarily chosen.[8] By this, however, Schopenhauer seems to mean that death by starvation does not follow accidentally (*per accidens*), but it rather comes as the last consequence of voluntarily chosen asceticism. A different kind of intentionality distinguishes therefore the common act of suicide, which is an expression of a strong affirmation of will, from death by starvation, which is voluntarily chosen but at the same time is the last step of a complete suppression of the will.

Having provided a preliminary terminological clarification, it is now possible to examine in detail Schopenhauer's position on suicide. To this end, I will first focus attention on Schopenhauer's dismissal of previous religious and philosophical arguments against this act (Sect. 3.1). Subsequently, I will briefly review the main points of his metaphysical worldview, paying particular attention to his gloomy understanding of the human condition and to his conception of death (Sect. 3.2). Having sketched the main features of what is commonly known as "Schopenhauer's pessimism," I will be finally able to examine his argument for the futility of suicide as well as his position on asceticism and on voluntary death by starvation (Sect. 3.3).

3.1 Schopenhauer's Critique of Religious and Philosophical Arguments against Suicide

Although in his essay *On Suicide* Schopenhauer resorts to various arguments to criticize the religious condemnation of suicide (the reference is, in particular, to "the monotheistic, which is to say, Jewish religions"; PP II: 276), his aim is one and the same: to show that this condemnation is *de facto* unsubstantiated. In Schopenhauer's view, the real problem of this condemnation is that it originated a number of prejudices and false beliefs. Suicide is thus commonly considered an act of cowardice, a consequence of madness, a morally wrong act or, even worst, a crime. This negative conception, of which the Church and the clergy are to be held responsible, has in its turn affected the lives of the relatives of those who committed suicide, who have to endure the shame of seeing their beloved ones treated as criminals, without any right to an honourable burial and with their legacies confiscated (as it was the case in England at Schopenhauer's time). What is more, the negative impact of the religious condemnation of suicide goes well beyond the limited circle of the families directly affected by a death by suicide. Indeed, this condemnation concerns everybody, Schopenhauer claims, in that it deprives us of the last refuge from the sufferings of life, namely death.[9] According to Schopenhauer, the clergy should be thus challenged "to explain by what mandate they label as *criminal* the deed of those many human beings whom we honoured and love […] we want to establish that *reasons* are demanded, and no empty phrases or abusive words will be accepted" (*id.*: 276–277).

Part of the essay *On Suicide* is precisely dedicated to show that the clergy has no good reasons to condemn suicide. Schopenhauer's argumentation can be summarized in the following five points:

1) As already pointed out by Hume, neither the Old Testament nor the New prohibits or definitely condemns suicide (PP II: 276).[10]

2) Given the impossibility to point to any biblical authority, teachers of religion have based their objection on their own philosophical grounds. According to Schopenhauer, however, these grounds are so shaky that the same teachers "seek to compensate for the lack of strength of their arguments by the strength of expression of their horror, hence through verbal abuse" (*id.*: 276). Schopenhauer further argues that the philosophical arguments adduced in support of the condemnation of suicide are not only unsound but also not valid for the Church (*qua* philosophical, not religious arguments). This latter conclusion seems to be, however, fallacious. Indeed, Schopenhauer begins the essay by correctly pointing out that the arguments used by teachers of religion do not come from revealed theology, but rather from natural theology—precisely because, as we have seen, neither the Old Testament nor the New prohibits suicide.[11] Nonetheless, this set of arguments from natural theology he oddly defines as philosophical, instead of religious. This leads him consequently to the mistaken assertion that these arguments are not valid for the Church. What could have led Schopenhauer to this mistake is probably the fact that both Augustine and Lactantius, who were the first Christian authors to declare suicide to be a sin, took their argument from Plato's *Phaedo*.[12] In a well-known passage, Socrates argues that "the gods are our guardians and that men are one of their possessions" (*Phaedo*, 62b): we cannot thus freely dispose of ourselves by taking our life, unless the gods command us to do so.[13] Schopenhauer considers this argument unworthy of any serious rebuttal and simply mentions that it is "snatched from the blue and now so trite" (PP II: 279).[14]

3) The fact that in some countries criminal law condemns suicide is not an ecclesiastically valid reason. Besides, this legal condemnation is "patently ridiculous, for what punishment can deter someone who seeks death?" (*id.*: 277).[15]

4) The Ancients provide a good example of the possibility of conceiving suicide in a different light. As Schopenhauer remarks, "how many heroes and wise men did not end their lives by a voluntary death!" (ibid.). Following Hume (1996: 395), Schopenhauer refers in particular to the following well-known passage from Pliny's *Natural History* (II, 5)—a passage which he considers paradigmatic of the Ancients' different attitude towards suicide: "Not even for God are all things possible—for he cannot, even if he wishes, commit suicide [*mortem consciscere*], the supreme boon that he has bestowed on man among all the penalties of life" (Pliny 1949: 187).[16] The implication is that mortality should not be seen as a sign of inferiority of human beings but, rather paradoxically, as a privilege over the immortal gods, who cannot take their life when they so wish and are, thus, condemned to immortality.

5) Far from condemning or prohibiting it, other religions (such as Hinduism) consider suicide as a religious action.

Schopenhauer concludes his analysis by putting forward a tentative hypothesis to explain the clergy's "extraordinarily robust zeal" (PP II: 279) in condemning suicide. Since this zeal is not supported either by the Bible or by solid, valid arguments, "could it not be this, that the voluntary giving up of life is a poor compliment to the one who said 'everything was very good [*panta kala lian*]'[17]?" (ibid.). In other words, the real reason lying at the bottom of the clergy's condemnation of suicide would be a pragmatic one: since by taking their own life

those who commit suicide call indirectly into question the goodness of the world created by God, thus shedding a negative light on the optimistic account of the *Genesis*, their act must be condemned. The strategy adopted by the monotheistic religions, Schopenhauer adds, is old and well known: they attack their enemy in order not to be attacked by it.

If Schopenhauer considers that there are no valid religious grounds against suicide, he is certainly no less harsh a critic of the arguments advanced by philosophers. In his main work, he claims that none of the most important proponents of virtue ethics knew how to express the true ground for the rejection of suicide; they "instead painstakingly gathered together any number of illusory grounds" (WWR I: 118). Similarly, in *On Suicide*, he considers the arguments against suicide advanced by the philosophers who accommodate themselves to the clergy as "weak, easily refuted sophisms" (PP II: 278). Despite or precisely because of the fact that these "sophisms" are too easily refutable, unfortunately, Schopenhauer does not provide any serious refutation of them. A similar lack of argumentation can be observed when it comes to the arguments against the prohibition of suicide, which Schopenhauer views in a more favourable light. As already mentioned, in *Parerga and Paralipomena* Schopenhauer refers to Hume's essay *On Suicide*, describing its author as "one of the leading thinkers and writers of England" (*id.*: 279) and praising the essay as highly worth reading, adding that it uses "cold reason" (ibid.) to refute the current objections to suicide. Even in this case, however, Schopenhauer neither presents nor examines the argumentation provided by Hume, confining himself to a brief condemnation of the fact that the essay was censored—something which, in his opinion, "redounds to the great disgrace of the English nation" and "shows what kind of a conscience the Church has in this point" (ibid.).[18]

As we have seen, one of the means used by Schopenhauer to reject the condemnation of suicide is the appeal to the different, that is, positive consideration, in which many heroes and sages of antiquity held suicide. In particular, Schopenhauer refers to two schools of philosophy: the Peripatetic and the Stoic. For what concerns the former, Schopenhauer recalls that, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1138a), Aristotle considers suicide to be "a wrong against the State, although not against one's own person" (PP II: 277).[19] However, to show that the Peripatetics were not strict opponents of suicide, Schopenhauer also mentions that, in his exposition of the ethics of the Peripatetics, the Byzantine writer Stobaeus quotes the following sentence: "Good people must escape life in all too great misfortune" (ibid.). The Stoic school, on its part, provides the clearest example of how suicide in the ancient world could not only be regarded as permitted but also "praised as a noble and heroic deed" (*id.*: 278), as hundreds of passages, particularly from Seneca, show.[20]

In section 16 of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer gives special attention to the Stoic ethics, which, according to him, exemplarily shows the human beings' capability of being guided by their practical reason.[21] This ethics is interpreted as a particular form of eudemonism, thus being radically different from those ethical systems that lay emphasis on virtue (Schopenhauer specifically mentions the doctrines of the *Vedas*, Plato, Christianity, and Kant). In his words, the Stoic ethics is essentially "not a doctrine of virtue at all, but simply a guide for rational living: its end and aim is the achievement of happiness through peace of mind, and virtuous conduct is included only as it were accidentally, as a means rather than an end" (WWR I: 113). What Schopenhauer particularly finds valuable and worthy of esteem in the Stoic ethics is the attempt to make use of reason in order to rise above ordinary, everyday suffering and pain. Still, he considers that this ethics is far from achieving anything perfect in this respect. Indeed, he identifies a contradiction in wanting to live without suffering and, at the same time, trying to achieve happiness through this kind of life. This contradiction essentially derives from the fact that, in Schopenhauer's philosophical system, suffering has a redeeming role and a deep meaning. In particular, that the eudemonistic ambition of a life without suffering is contradictory can be evinced by the fact that

> the Stoics are forced to include in their guide for a blessed life (because this is what their ethics always remains) a recommendation for suicide in the case of excessive and incurable bodily suffering incapable of being philosophized away with principles and inferences, just as oriental despots include a fine vial of poison among their splendid jewels and utensils. In this case, bliss, the only purpose of life, has been thwarted and suffering can now only be evaded through death, which should itself be undertaken with indifference, like any course of medication. (*id.*: 117–118)

Thus, to the Stoic sage, who "remains stiff and wooden, a mannequin that no one can engage with and who does not himself know what to do with his own wisdom" (*id.*: 118), Schopenhauer opposes "those who the wisdom of India sets before us and has actually brought forth, those voluntary penitents who overcome the world; or even the Christian saviour, that splendid figure […] who, with perfect virtue, holiness and sublimity, nevertheless stands before us in a state of the utmost suffering" (ibid.).

If Schopenhauer looks with a benevolent eye upon the Stoic doctrine (after all, although the Stoic ethics is contradictory, it does not condemn suicide), on the contrary, his consideration of Kant's attitude towards suicide is highly critical. This should come as no surprise if we consider that, as Cartwright (1999: 254) points out, "Schopenhauer saw himself as Kant's true philosophical heir, and he took great pride in calling himself a Kantian. Yet Schopenhauer's allegiance to his Kantian heritage did not extend to Kant's ethics." Over one-third of the prize essay *On the Basis of Morals* is devoted to criticize the foundation given to ethics by Kant, and Schopenhauer overtly admits that his grounding of morality "is diametrically opposed to Kant's in its essential points" (BM: 122/Schopenhauer 2009). There is little doubt that Schopenhauer is also willing to acknowledge the great merits that Kant has in ethics: he purified this branch of philosophy of all eudemonism, he gave to this science "a basis that had real advantages over the previous ones" (*id.*: 121), and he made freedom and necessity coexist, something which, according to Schopenhauer, is "Kant's greatest and most brilliant service to ethics" (*id.*: 172). Nevertheless, in Schopenhauer's view, the negative aspects of Kant's ethics outweigh by far the positive ones.[22]

Schopenhauer's critique of Kant's prohibition of suicide can be particularly found in section 5 of *On the Basis of Morals*, which focuses on duties to oneself. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, the existence of such duties is far from being uncontroversial and several authors have criticized this notion for being self-contradictory or even absurd. Kant, however, considers that these duties play a foundational role for all obligations. For his part, Schopenhauer is not convinced by the arguments adduced by Kant and completely rejects the existence of such duties. What is surprising, though, is that he makes no mention of Kant's distinction between *homo phaenomenon* and *homo noumenon* in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, which is central to Kant's justification of the existence of duties to oneself, but rather develops his argumentation following Kant's analysis in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*—a choice that can be explained by Schopenhauer's decision to take this latter work as a guiding thread in his critique of Kant's moral theory.[23]

Schopenhauer begins by pointing out that duties to oneself must be either duties of right or duties of love, the latter also called duties of virtue (BM: 204). This claim is doubly puzzling. First, Kant deals with the duties of love in sections 23–36 of the *Doctrine of Virtue* in *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Duties of love differ from duties of respect in that the performance of the former puts others into obligation, whereas the observance of the latter does not result in obligation on the part of others. As this distinction already makes clear, duties of love and duties of respect are both duties to others, not duties to oneself, as Schopenhauer claims.[24] Second, one of the chief, if not the chief, distinctions made by Kant in the *Metaphysics of Morals* is that between duties of right (*officia iuris*) and duties of virtue (*officia virtutis s. ethica*). Whereas for the former external lawgiving is possible, for the latter it is not possible, because "no external lawgiving can bring about someone's setting an end for himself (because this is an internal act of the mind)" (MM, 6/Kant 1991:

239). This is precisely why duties to oneself can only be duties of virtue. What characterizes duties of virtue is thus self-constraint and the setting of inner ends. As Marcus Willascheck (1997: 207) puts it, "how people treat themselves, as long as others are not concerned even indirectly, is not a matter of right but of ethics, since no conflict between 'the choice of one' and 'the choice of another' can possibly occur. And in fact, no duties to oneself are mentioned in the *Doctrine of Right*."

Although Schopenhauer's association of duties of right with duties to ourselves is mistaken in the light of the distinction made by Kant in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, this error can be in part justified if we take into account some internal contradictions existing in Kant's classification of duties. First, according to Kant's distinction, duties of virtue are imperfect (that is, "fulfilment of them is *merit* […] but failure to fulfil them is not in itself *culpability* […] but rather mere *deficiency in moral worth*"; MM, 6: 390), whereas duties of right are perfect. Nonetheless, the duty of self-preservation, which is a duty of virtue, is included among the *perfect* duties to oneself (MM, 6: 421). Second, for the reasons already mentioned, duties to oneself can only be duties of virtue. Yet, in the table of duties that can be found in the *Introduction to the Doctrine of Rights* (MM, 6: 240), the distinction between duties to oneself and duties to others is applied to both duties of right and duties of virtue. As Paul Guyer (2016: 92) points out, Kant had already suggested a similar distinction in the lectures on ethics recorded by Vigilantius. Here duties are divided into duties of virtue and duties of right, which are both internal and external. Internal duties are "(a) either strict or internal duties of right, i.e., the right of humanity in our own person, or (b) broad or internal duties of virtue, the end of humanity in our own person, or that end which humanity imposes on us, and which we should therefore possess" (LE, Vigilantius 27: 583).

As this brief analysis shows, Schopenhauer's division of duties to oneself into duties of right and duties of love (duties of virtue) could be in part justified and even finds some support in Kant's texts. Based on this basic distinction, Schopenhauer takes into consideration both kinds of duties to oneself, examining their consistency. According to his analysis, duties of right towards oneself are not possible because of the principle *volenti non fit iniuria* ("no injury is done to someone who wills it"[25]). Schopenhauer takes this principle to be self-evident, "for since what I do is at all times what I will, what happens to me from myself too is always only what I will, and consequently never a wrong" (BM: 131). For what concerns duties of love towards oneself he considers as superfluous, in that they demand too little of the moral agent. To show this, Schopenhauer calls attention to the Christian commandment "love your neighbours as yourself," pointing out that this commandment clearly assumes the love that everyone harbours for oneself as the maximum, so that there is no need to add the reverse formulation "love yourself as your neighbour." Schopenhauer thus concludes that a duty of love towards oneself is supererogatory.[26]

Schopenhauer continues his analysis of Kant's view of suicide arguing that what is often presented as duties to oneself is in reality a line of reasoning against suicide, "stuck fast in prejudices and conducted from the shallowest of grounds" (ibid.). As a consequence of this prejudicial consideration of this act—which should be rather considered as a privilege (*Vorrecht*) that nature has granted us for being exposed not only to physical but also to mental suffering—suicide is condemned as contrary to the duties we owe to ourselves. Schopenhauer actually recognizes that the question of whether man should renounce this privilege for moral reasons is a difficult one. However, there seems to be for him no doubt that this question cannot be answered by referring either to the usual, shallow arguments or to the untenable reasons adduced by Kant:

> Even the grounds against suicide that Kant is unashamed to put forward […] I can in all conscience entitle nothing other than wretchednesses [*Armsäligkeiten*] that do not even deserve an answer. One has to laugh when one imagines that reflections of that sort were supposed to have wrested the dagger from the hands of Cato, Cleopatra, Cocceius Nerva […] or Arria the wife of Paetus. (*id.*: 131–132)

Schopenhauer does not give any answer to the question of whether man should renounce this privilege for moral reasons, but rather confines himself to claim that "if there really are genuine moral motives against suicide, then they lie very deep and are not to be reached with the plumb line of the usual ethics in any case" (*id.*: 132). These motives, Schopenhauer concludes, rather belong to a higher standpoint, namely the ascetic one.

The "grounds against suicide that Kant is unashamed to put forward," to which Schopenhauer makes reference in the passage quoted earlier, are to be identified with the two arguments advanced in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, namely the natural law argument (G, 4/Kant 2011: 421–422) and the disposition argument (G, 4: 429) already examined in the previous chapter. Although Schopenhauer considers both arguments wretched so as not even to deserve an answer, section 7 of *On the Basis of Morals* actually contains a refutation of the first argument. In this section, Schopenhauer considers again Kant's division of duties into duties of right and duties of virtue. As already mentioned, Schopenhauer clarifies this division in the light of the analysis developed by Kant in the *Groundwork*. This is confusing because, in this work, Kant divides duties into four categories: perfect and imperfect duties to oneself and perfect and imperfect duties to other, adding in a footnote that, contrary to the traditional use, he also divides perfect duties into internal and external. No mention of the distinction between duties of right and duties of virtue is made.

Another source of confusion stems from Schopenhauer's analysis of Kant's attempt in the *Groundwork* to derive his division of duties from the categorical imperative, an attempt that Schopenhauer defines as "forced and manifestly poor" (BM: 159). Having presented four well-known illustrations of how the categorical imperative should be applied, Kant distinguishes between actions whose maxim cannot be thought without contradiction as a universal law of nature and actions whose maxim can be thought but not willed as a universal law of nature. Accordingly, in the first case the maxim of the action conflicts with strict or narrower (unrelenting) duties, whereas in the second case only with wider (meritorious) duties. Surprisingly, although Kant makes no mention of duties of right and duties of virtue—a distinction which, as mentioned, will appear in *The Metaphysics of Morals*—Schopenhauer associates perfect and wider duties with duties of right, and imperfect and wider duties with duties of virtue (also duties of love). This association can be, however, partly explained by the fact that in *The Metaphysics of Morals* duties of right are narrow, perfect duties, whereas duties of virtue are wide, imperfect duties.

Schopenhauer turns his attention to strict or narrower duties, claiming that the maxim of those actions (Schopenhauer refers to it as the "maxim of injustice"), which according to Kant cannot be thought without contradiction as a universal law of nature, precisely constitutes the law that actually prevails in nature. In other words, the criterion chosen by Kant to identify whether the maxim of an action conflicts with strict or narrower duties would be in contradiction with everyday reality. To prove his claim, Schopenhauer considers Kant's natural law argument against suicide. Before turning attention to Schopenhauer's critique, it may be helpful to briefly recall this argument. Kant imagines the case of a man who, feeling weary of life because of a series of ills, asks himself whether it is contrary to a duty to oneself to take his life. According to the test of universalizability, this man asks himself whether the maxim of his action ("from self-love I make it my principle to shorten my life if, when protracted any longer, it threatens more ill than it promises agreeableness"; G, 4: 422) might become a universal law of nature. Kant's answer is negative, for "a nature whose law it were to destroy life itself by means of the same sensation the function of which it is to impel towards the advancement of life, would contradict itself and would thus not subsist as a nature" (ibid.).

Schopenhauer dismisses Kant's argument arguing that empirical evidence abundantly shows that there is no contradiction whatsoever in considering the suicide's maxim as a universal law of nature:

> So this maxim is supposed to be impossible even *to think* as a universal law of nature. I say that, since here the power of the state cannot intervene, precisely that maxim proves itself unhindered as an *actually pertaining law of nature* [*wirklich bestehendes Naturgesetz*]. For it is quite certainly a universal rule that a human being actually resorts to suicide as soon as the inborn, gigantically strong drive towards the preservation of life is decisively overpowered by the greatness of his sufferings: everyday experience shows this. (BM: 160)

We have already seen in the previous chapter that Kant's natural law argument is problematic in several ways. Schopenhauer's rejection of this argument seems to be, however, too hasty. As a matter of fact, Kant is not denying an empirical fact, namely that human beings sometimes resort to suicide when suffering overpowers the instinct of self-preservation. Similarly, in the second of the four examples put forward in the *Groundwork* to show how a maxim should be tested to see whether it can be universalized (one borrows money, promising to repay it, although he knows that he will not be able to repay), Kant is not claiming that false promises are not constitutive features of reality. The point of Kant's test of universalizability is rather to check whether these specific maxims may be thought without contradiction as *universal* laws of nature, that is, as laws adopted by *all* rational agents. In other words, Schopenhauer's critique of Kant's argument operates at the *descriptive* level, failing to see that Kant's test of universalizability operates at the *prescriptive* level.

Having thus rejected Kant's argumentation, Schopenhauer concludes his analysis of the *natural law argument* in a very similar way to section 5, namely claiming that it is a risky presupposition to suppose that there is any thought or argument whatsoever that could restrain from suicide a man who suffers, once the fear of death has been overcome. Moral theorists have not yet discovered this thought, Schopenhauer adds, and "we can be confident that arguments of the kind Kant offers against suicide on this occasion […] have never yet held back anyone who is tired of life, even for a moment." (ibid.)

3.2 Schopenhauer's Metaphysical Worldview

Schopenhauer's metaphysical system, which takes Kant's philosophy as point of departure, can be best synthesized by the following six words: the world as will and representation. The world is for Schopenhauer representation because "everything there is for cognition (i.e. the whole world) is only an object in relation to a subject, an intuition of a beholder" (WWR I: 23–24), or to put it differently: "Everything that can or does belong in any way to the world is unavoidably afflicted with this dependence on the subject and exists only for the subject. The world is representation" (*id.*: 24). According to this picture, no object can be consistently thought apart from a subject. Everything that exists in the world and is in space and time has only a relative existence: the essence of the world is thus hidden to us.

Schopenhauer also claims nonetheless that although we can never reach the essence of things from the outside, we can find a path to it from the inside. This path is the will, our will, which gives us the key to solve the riddle of the world. Indeed, to the subject of cognition the body is given in two different ways: on the one hand, as a representation in intuition by the understanding, that is, a representation like any other, an object among objects; on the other hand, the body is also given as something which is cognized without mediation, that is, as will:

> The will is the most immediate thing in our consciousness, and thus has not passed completely into the form of representation in which object and subject stand opposed to each other; rather, it announces itself immediately and in such a way that subject and object are not distinguished with complete clarity, and it becomes known to the individual only in its separate acts, not as a whole. (*id.*: 134)

Schopenhauer maintains that the double cognition of the essence of our own body is the key to the essence of every natural phenomenon. To defend this claim, he puts forward the following argument from analogy which, in a nutshell, can be summarized as follows: since objects other than our own body are representations just like the body, being therefore in this respect homogeneous with it, we can assume that "what remains after disregarding their existence as representation of a subject must have the same inner essence as what we call *will*" (*id.*: 129). This derives from the fact that, "we do not know anything—we cannot even think anything—besides will and representation" (ibid.).[27]

Thanks to this analogy and using reflection, we can recognize that one and the same will is what constitutes the inner essence not only of human beings and animals, but also of plants, crystals, and even every striving and acting force in nature such as gravity.[28] In other words, the will is the deep essence of both the organic and inorganic world. From appearances, we can thus pass over to the Kantian *thing in itself*:

> Appearance means representation and nothing more: all representations, of whatever sort they may be, all *objects*, are *appearances*. Only the will is *thing in itself*: as such, the will is by no means a representation, it is quite different in kind from representation: all representations, all objects are the appearance, the visible manifestation, the *objecthood* [*Objektität*] of the will. The will is the innermost, the kernel of every individual thing and likewise of the whole: it appears in every blind operation of a force of nature: it also appears in deliberative human action; these differ from each other only in the grade of their appearing, not in the essence of what appears. (*id.*: 135)

The will, as thing in itself, thus lies outside of time and space, that is, outside of the *principium individuationis*, and remains unaffected by the multiplicity of appearances that constitute its different degrees of objectivation—appearances that have, in the ideas, their eternal forms or archetypes.[29]

Two aspects of the will need to be emphasized in order to understand Schopenhauer's pessimistic attitude towards existence. First, the will is essentially a blind and inexorable impulse, a striving without pause and goal. From the lowest to the highest degree, nature is struggle, a "mutual conflict of all the appearances" (*id.*: 174).[30] This state of things derives from the fact that "the will needs to live off itself because there is nothing outside of it and it is a hungry will" (*id.*: 179). What the will wills is always life. This is precisely the reason for which, according to Schopenhauer, it is pleonastic to say "will to life" instead of simply saying "will." Second, the will knows no final or definitive fulfilment. Every satisfaction of desire is transitory and inevitably followed by a new desire, so that "as long as our consciousness is filled by our will, as long as we are given over to the pressure of desires with their constant hopes and fears, as long as we are the subject of willing, we will never have lasting happiness or peace" (*id.*: 220).[31] The image of the wheel of Ixion, one of the famous metaphors used by Schopenhauer to describe the condition of the individual enslaved to the will, reveals to what extent the human being is condemned, in his view, to never-ending frustration, dissatisfaction, and suffering.

The picture of the human condition depicted by Schopenhauer could not be bleaker. Like a pendulum, life swings back and forth between pain and boredom. Pain is what we feel because of the impossibility of having lasting happiness or peace; boredom is what we experience when our willing lacks objects to will.[32] To make matters worse, the human being is also the neediest of all beings. He has a thousand needs and, at the same time, is threatened by the most different dangers, so that "for the vast majority of people, life itself is nothing but a constant struggle for this same existence, with the certainty of losing it in the end" (*id.*: 339). One might think that the luckiest of us escape this condition, but this is, according to Schopenhauer, a gross mistake. Indeed, "whatever nature or good fortune might have done, whoever you are and whatever you possess, you cannot ward off the pain

that is essential to life" (*id.*: 341). The following passage describes in the crudest terms the tragicomic character of human existence:

> They [human beings] are like mechanical clocks that are wound up and go without knowing why; whenever someone is begotten and born, the clock of human life is wound again so it can play the same hurdy-gurdy that has already been played countless times, movement by movement, beat by beat, with insignificant variations. Every individual, every human face and its life history is just one more short dream of the infinite spirit of nature, the persistent will to life; it is just one more fleeting image jotted playfully on its infinite page, space and time, and is allowed an infinitesimal existence (compared with these), before it is erased to free up room. Nonetheless, and here is the troubling side of life, each of these fleeting images, these stale conceptions, must be paid for by the whole will to life in all of its vehemence, with many profound sufferings and ultimately with the long-feared arrival of a bitter death. […] Viewed overall and in a general manner, and extracting only the most significant features, the life of every individual is in fact always a tragedy; but worked through in detail, it has the character of a comedy. (*id.*: 348)

The conclusion drawn by Schopenhauer is that human life is *a priori* essentially suffering and lack of true happiness.[33] Leibniz could not be more mistaken when he defended the claim that this is the best of all possible worlds. On the contrary, according to Schopenhauer, it may be proven that this is "the *worst* of all possible worlds" (WWR II: 598). For this reason, the brevity of life, about which the human beings often complain, might be the best thing about it—or, to be more precise, the second best thing. For, the best thing would be not to be born at all, as best synthesized in what is known as the "wisdom of Silenus."[34]

Here it is noteworthy that, conceiving the essence of life as suffering and lack of true happiness, Schopenhauer indirectly calls into question the premise of a well-known analogy-based religious argument against suicide. To quote St. Thomas Aquinas' classical formulation of the argument from the *Summa Theologica* (II, II, Q. 64, Art. 5), "[i]t is altogether unlawful to kill oneself […] because life is God's gift to man, and is subject to His power, Who kills and makes to live. Hence whoever takes his own life, sins against God" (Aquinas 2007: 1463). Against this kind of arguments, it is often argued that "if life is a gift, then it becomes the property of the recipient, who may therefore do with it as he wishes. In giving a gift, the donor relinquishes his or her rights and control over the gift item; if he does not, then the item is not a genuine gift" (Battin 1996: 34).[35] The Schopenhauerian perspective renders this objection unnecessary, for it calls into question the very premise on which this religious argument is based, namely that life is a gift. This conception is explicitly criticized in the chapter *On the Nothingness and Suffering of Life* from the second volume of *The Will as World and Representation* (§46). Here, Schopenhauer rejects the explanation of the world from a will guided by knowledge (like Anaxagoras' *nous*) for being in contradiction with "the loudly screaming testimony of an entire world filled with misery" (WWR II: 595). This optimistic explanation portrays life as a gift, "while it is clear as day that anyone who could have first seen and looked the gift over would have said 'no thank you very much'" (ibid.). Needless to say, the evidence to which Schopenhauer appeals is not at all as clear as he would like us to believe. Still, his conclusion is that human existence "far from having the character of a *gift*, has the completely opposite character of a *guilty indebtedness*" (ibid.).

In accordance with his interpretation of the world as governed by a blind, irrational will, Schopenhauer believes that the only attitude which conforms to the miseries of the world is a pessimistic attitude. In reality, Schopenhauer never refers to his philosophy as "pessimism" in the published writings, and only very seldom in the *Manuscript Remains* and his letters.[36] Nonetheless, he rejects optimism and defines it as "not only an absurd, but even a truly *wicked* way of thinking, a bitter mockery of the unspeakable sufferings of

humanity" (WWR I: 352), "not only a false, but even a pernicious doctrine" (WWR II: 599–600). The understanding of his philosophy as "pessimistic" is, thus, more than justified.

According to Sandra Shapshay (2019: 68), Schopenhauer's pessimistic doctrine can be summarized in three main points: "(a) there is a tremendous amount of undeserved and unredeemed suffering in the world; (b) this is an extremely bad-making feature of existence, and there is a *preponderance* of this bad-making feature over any good-making features of existence; and (c) this situation *cannot* get substantially better in time." Whereas most people would agree with the first claim, the truth of the two other claims is certainly less evident. Pessimistic doctrines usually maintain that pains and sufferings outweigh pleasures in this life. This view of existence can be, however, accused of laying too much emphasis on pain and suffering, ignoring the fact that life is also made of pleasure and happiness. To this, Schopenhauer might reply that "no achieved object of willing gives lasting, unwavering satisfaction; rather, it is only ever like the alms thrown to a beggar that spares his life today so that his agony can be prolonged until tomorrow" (WWR I: 219–220). This negative view of pleasure, according to which "all satisfaction, or what is generally called happiness, is actually and essentially only ever *negative* and absolutely never positive" (*id.*: 345) can be, however, seen as biased or unsupported by empirical evidence.[37] For what concerns the third point (the situation cannot get substantially better in time), this pessimistic claim is basically grounded on Schopenhauer's aforementioned view of the metaphysical will as a blind and inexorable impulse, a striving without pause and goal. Here, Shapshay (2019: 85) points out, however, that given the fact that Schopenhauer conceives of his metaphysics not as transcendent but rather as an immanent interpretation of the phenomena, "the identification of thing-in-itself with will cannot be used in a foundationalist manner to show that the world *cannot* get substantially better. His metaphysics must always be responsive to the empirical evidence, and there may be actual empirical evidence of progress."

Given the fact that the human condition is so bleak and desperate that it would be better for us never to have been, one might wonder why human beings do not give up their lives and rather prefer to keep on living a life full of misery, suffering, and pain. To explain this paradox, Schopenhauer invokes "the primordial and unconditioned nature of the will" (WWR II: 373), which appears as the same tendency of life and vital energy which makes, for instance, a plant grow. This irrational and blind attachment to life is the reason for which "a human being can love above all else an existence full of need, trouble, pain, anguish, and then again full of boredom" (ibid.). It is when this love of life becomes weak that hypochondria, spleen, and melancholy make their appearance. The complete exhaustion of this blind force shows itself, instead, as an inclination to suicide (*id.*: 374).

The same irrational and blind will to life also explains man's *horror mortis* (the horror of death).[38] Schopenhauer clarifies this aspect in chapter 19 of the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, where man's attachment to life is mentioned as one of the facts that prove the primacy of the will (the inner and true essence of man) over the intellect (a mere accident of our being). According to Schopenhauer, it is evident to the intellect that not to live is better than to live badly—a maxim that Schopenhauer infers by twofold contraposition from Aristotle's "to live well is better than to live" (WWR II: 252).[39] Yet, most of us prefer to cling to life rather than to give it up, even when this means to live badly. This irrational attachment to life cannot be explained by reference to either the object itself (that is, life, which is essentially suffering) or the intellect (attachment to life is not the result of a rational decision). On the contrary, according to Schopenhauer, "we are ourselves the will to life: thus we must live, well or badly" (WWR II: 252). In other words, a rational assessment of life would lead us to the conclusion that, since to live means inevitably to live badly (given the reasons mentioned earlier), it would be better for us not to live at all. However, since we are essentially the will to life and given the supremacy of the will over the intellect, it follows that, instead of desiring death, we irrationally fear it above all. This *horror mortis*, Schopenhauer concludes, is what explains the common opinion held by ordinary minds that whoever commits suicide must be insane. On the other hand,

horror mortis accounts for the great admiration that such an action inspires in thinking minds—for suicide goes against the nature of every living thing.[40]

The arguments against the human, all too human, fear of death constitute a large part of the considerable attention that Schopenhauer pays to the topic of death.[41] Amongst other things, Schopenhauer mentions Epicurus' well-known argument contained in the *Letter to Menoeceus*, according to which "when we are, death is not, and when death is, we are not" (WWR II: 484).[42] He also argues that "infinity afterwards [*a parte post*] without me cannot be more frightening than the infinity before [*a parte ante*] without me; since the two are different only by virtue of the intervention of an ephemeral life-dream" (ibid.).[43] Furthermore, Schopenhauer claims that "the form of the will's appearance (which is to say: the form of life or of reality) is really just the *present*, not the future or the past: these are only conceptual, they exist only in the context of cognition. […] Nobody has ever lived in the past, and nobody will ever live in the future; the *present* is the only form of all life, and it is also life's most secure possession, and can never be torn away from it" (WWR I: 304). Finally, Schopenhauer maintains not only that death is not an evil, but also that it often appears as a good thing, for "everything that runs up against an insurmountable obstacle in its existence or its endeavours, anything that suffers from incurable diseases or inconsolable grief, has as its last resort […] a return to the womb of nature" (WWR II: 486).[44]

Of all the arguments mentioned by Schopenhauer to show the irrationality of the human fear of death, there is one which is worth particular attention, for it anticipates several aspects of his main argument regarding the futility of suicide. According to Schopenhauer's worldview, the will (the thing in itself) is not touched by birth and death; these only belong to the individual (the phenomenon), who comes into the world and then dies. However, if on the one hand the individual is but a single example or specimen of the appearance of the will to life, on the other, his essence is will to life. This is why Schopenhauer affirms, as we have already seen, that "we are ourselves the will to life" (WWR II: 252). But to the extent that each individual is the will to life, each individual can be said to take part in immortality—for will to life is not touched by birth and death.

To clarify this aspect, Schopenhauer considers the relation existing between human beings and nature. As he points out, nature does not care about the single, individual human being, but only about the species. Nonetheless, "human beings are nature itself, and in fact nature at the highest degree of its self-consciousness" (WWR I: 303). In this "identity of the macrocosm and microcosm" (WWR II: 502) the human being can thus find consolation against the idea of death, for he knows that nature, of which he is part, will not cease to exist: the cessation of life does not imply the annihilation of the living principle; nor from death follows the entire destruction of man. On the contrary, "the force actuating an earlier, now extinguished, life is the same force active in a now blooming life" (*id.*: 488).

To overcome the horror of death we must thus place ourselves at a higher (that is, supra-individual) standpoint and attain a philosophical knowledge of the essence of the world. We will then discover that "everyone is transient, but only as appearance; as thing in itself everyone is timeless, and thus endless as well" (WWR I: 309). Knowing that we ourselves are "that will whose objectivation or image is the whole world," death will appear to us as "a false illusion, an impotent phantom" (*id.*: 310). Accordingly, when in chapter 41 of the second part of *The World as Will and Representation* Schopenhauer evokes Homer's imagery of the generations of men as generations of leaves,[45] he does so in order to emphasize not the transience of human existence but rather the immortality of what constitutes the inner essence of every human being:

> [Y]ou, the confounded questioner who, in this failure to recognize your own being, are like the leaf on the tree which, wilting in autumn and about to fall, grieves over its fall and will not be consoled by the sight of the fresh green that will clothe the tree in the spring, but complains, "That isn't me! Those are completely different leaves!"—Oh foolish leaf! Where do you want to go? And where are the others supposed to come

> from? Where is the nothingness whose gaping maw you fear?—Recognize your own being, the very thing that is so consumed with a thirst for existence, recognize it again in the inner, secret, driving force of the tree which, forever *one* and the same in all generations of leaves, is not affected by coming to be and passing away. (WWR II: 494)[46]

3.3 The Futility of Suicide

To someone unfamiliar with Schopenhauer's philosophy, the bleak and pessimistic worldview described in the previous section might be understood as, more or less directly, justifying suicide as the only rational and obvious choice available to human beings. Indeed, as Dale Jacquette (1999: 302) puts it, "[i]f to live is to suffer, and if life and death are unreal anyway, why permit oneself to suffer needlessly?" As we have already seen, Schopenhauer invokes the irrational and blind will to life in order to explain the paradox of why human beings do not give up their lives and rather prefer to keep on living a life full of misery, suffering, and pain. Jacquette's question, however, does not point to *empirical matters of fact*, but rather to *rational* (or *moral*) *reasons*. In other words, the question at stake is not why human beings *do* not give up their lives if to live is to suffer, but rather whether human beings *should* give up their lives if to live is to suffer. Or, to put it differently, if a rational assessment of life leads us to the conclusion that it would be better for us not to live at all given that to live means inevitably to live badly, are there any rational or moral reasons for which we should not commit suicide?

Schopenhauer's answer to this question can be found in section 69 of *The World as Will and Representation*. This answer is, however, already anticipated in three passages from sections 54, 59, and 65 of the same work. All these passages basically repeat the same argument: since, as mentioned, death only concerns the appearance and not the thing in itself, suicide is a vain act, for it gives only an apparent liberation from suffering. As Schopenhauer puts it in the first of these three sections,

> [c]onversely, someone who is oppressed by the burdens of life, who certainly desires life and affirms it, but detests its sufferings and in particular does not want to put up with the difficult lot that has fallen to him any longer: a person like this cannot hope for liberation in death, and cannot save himself through suicide; the temptation of cool, dark Orcus as a haven of peace is just a false illusion. The earth turns from day into night; the individual dies: but the sun itself burns its eternal noontime without pause.[47] For the will to life, life is a certainty: the form of life is the endless present; it does not matter how individuals, appearances of the Idea, come into existence in time and pass away like fleeting dreams.—Even here, suicide already appears to us as a futile and therefore foolish act: when we have gone further in our discussion, it will appear in an even less favourable light. (WWR I: 307)

This passage already contains the main themes that Schopenhauer will reiterate in sections 59, 65, and 69 in order to argue for the futility of suicide: the suicide as someone who ardently desires and affirms life, but who can no longer bear the burdens of life; death, whose image as a haven of peace is a false illusion, as offering no liberation and no redemption from suffering; the imagery of the individuals as fleeting appearances of the will, and of the will to life as a never-ending burning sun; and, finally, suicide as a futile and foolish act.

What is striking in this view is the peculiarity of Schopenhauer's attitude towards suicide, which becomes patent if we compare it with that of other philosophers. Indeed, unlike common philosophical and religious arguments, Schopenhauer grounds his opposition to suicide simply on the *uselessness* of this solution. In other words, Schopenhauer would be a supporter of suicide, *only if* suicide would provide an efficient solution to the problems concerning the human condition. However, since this is not the case (for the reason

explained earlier), he rejects and opposes suicide. This can be clearly evinced from section 59. Here, Schopenhauer understands the meaning of *Hamlet*'s monologue as implying that the human condition is so wretched that non-existence would be definitively better than existence. In Schopenhauer's view, we should act accordingly and take the second horn of the well-known dilemma "to be or not to be"[48] and choose suicide, *if only* suicide would really offer the possibility of not being. Unfortunately, this is not the case; for, as we have already seen, "death is not an absolute termination [*keine absolute Vernichtung*]" (*id.*: 351). Suicide must be thus rejected as a false solution to our problems.

The argument for the futility of suicide reappears in section 69, where Schopenhauer argues at length against the possibility of conceiving suicide as a definitive escape from suffering. The argumentation developed in this section basically reiterates the elements already mentioned: consisting in the abolition and destruction of the single, individual appearance of the will, suicide is "a futile and foolish act" (*id.*: 426), because it leaves the thing in itself untouched.[49] To clarify his argument, Schopenhauer mentions the occasional case of a father who, having decided to commit suicide, also takes the life of his children. The aim of this man is to rescue himself and his beloved children from the miseries and sufferings of existence. According to Schopenhauer, however, this man is caught in a delusion. Indeed, he takes appearance for the essence in itself. His act is thus useless and vain, since it destroys the individual appearance in a particular place and at a particular time, but leaves untouched the will, that is the thing in itself.[50]

Several scholars have objected to this that people who commit suicide usually have no intention to break the thing in itself. Michael Fox (1980: 168), for instance, insightfully argues that

> suicide is anything but futile, considering that the successful suicide (the typical case, not the shopworn disgraced heroes or the ageing wise men who are largely fictional) accomplishes exactly what he intended, namely, to destroy his individual life, terminate his personal consciousness and his suffering, and possibly also to cause anguish and/or a guilt reaction in others. So far from being pointless, his act realizes its purpose very effectively. Since, as Schopenhauer himself contends, there is no such thing as personal immortality, the suicide quite literally "ends himself", and this is his sole concern. Schopenhauer simply makes the mistake of judging whether a motivated and deliberate act accomplishes its objective in terms of considerations appropriate only to a different, ethical-metaphysical level of analysis.[51]

Fox is certainly right in pointing out that Schopenhauer's characterization of the suicide's purpose is more than questionable. This becomes patent, for instance, in the way in which Schopenhauer presents the case of the father mentioned earlier: "affected by the recognition of the misery of all life," Schopenhauer writes, "he now means to annul the essence along with the appearance, and in this manner rescue himself and his children (who he sees as a repetition of his own life) from existence and its miseries" (WWR I: 427). It seems evident that Schopenhauer is here projecting his metaphysical worldview onto the purpose of the father. Indeed, the purpose of the father is simply (*a*) "to rescue himself and his children […] from existence and its miseries." However, since for Schopenhauer (*a*) implies (*b*), that is, "to annul the essence along with the appearance", he attributes purpose (*b*) also to the father, who is nonetheless only motivated by purpose (*a*).

What Fox also means is that in order to judge the success of an act *x* (in this case, suicide) we should compare the final result with the original purpose. If these two elements correspond, then *x* can be considered as a successful act. What we should avoid (and this is precisely what, according to Fox, Schopenhauer does) is to judge the success of *x* by relating its final result to considerations appropriate only to a different (in this case, ethical-metaphysical) level of analysis. To illustrate this, we can take the case of someone who commits suicide as an act of revenge. If as a consequence of this act the person accused of having caused the suicide is ostracized and feels guilty, then we would be justified in saying

that with regard to the suicide's purpose this act is successful. Every other consideration, such as the fact that this suicide leaves the thing in itself untouched, is here out of place—at least, for what concerns the success of the act.

The problem with Schopenhauer's argument is that he takes the purpose of the suicidal individual to be, in general, that of putting an end to the sufferings deriving from the particular constitution of the world. This constitutes a problem precisely because, in Schopenhauer's view, the only thing suicide can achieve is to destroy one particular appearance of the will (a single phenomenon), but not the will itself (the thing in itself). In other words, Schopenhauer considers that, in order to judge the success of an act of suicide, we cannot abstract precisely from those ethical-metaphysical considerations, which Fox judges to be appropriate only to a different level of analysis. Indeed, according to Schopenhauer, these considerations are essential in order to verify the correspondence mentioned earlier between the original purpose and the final result. To make this clear, we may briefly consider Schopenhauer's notion of palingenesis.

As Schopenhauer explains in the chapter *On Death and Its Relation to the Indestructibility of Our Essence in Itself* (a supplement to the fourth book of *The World as Will and Representation*), "death is the loss of one individuality and the attainment of another" (WWR II: 517). According to this theory, when we die, the real kernel of us, which is will, persists, whereas the intellect, as any other part of the body, is lost. Our will assumes then the shape of a new being and receives a new intellect: the new being has thus no recollection of his or her previous existence. This is precisely why Schopenhauer carefully points out that his theory should be described as palingenesis, not as metempsychosis, since the latter postulates "the transition of the entire so-called soul into another body," whereas the former assumes that what follows from death is the "*disintegration* [*Zersetzung*] and new formation of the individual" (PP II: 249).

Let us now consider again the question of whether the person who commits suicide achieves his objective of putting an end to his sufferings. The answer to this question depends on whether we can establish a personal identity between the old being (the one who commits suicide) and the new being (the one in whom the will has persisted). Note that it is fundamental to establish this identity, for Schopenhauer's argument implies that the act of suicide is unsuccessful precisely because the new being continues to experience essentially the same sufferings to which the act of suicide accomplished by the old being is supposed to put an end. Conversely, if personal identity between the old and the new being cannot be established, then the act of suicide can be considered as successful, for the person who commits suicide can be said to have achieved his objective, namely that of putting an end to *his* sufferings.

According to Schopenhauer, "every human being can be regarded from two opposed points of view. In the first he is the temporarily beginning and ending individual […] in the second he is the indestructible primal essence objectifying itself in every existing thing" (PP II: 250). It is precisely because of the persistence of the will (the "indestructible primal essence") that Schopenhauer considers the act of suicide as unsuccessful. The problem is, however, that for Schopenhauer the will is egoless, that is, death implies the complete disintegration of the individual. This is precisely the reason for which Schopenhauer reiterates that his theory of palingenesis should not be confused with metempsychosis—precisely to avoid the illusion of personal immortality. Besides, as Janaway (2017: 3706) points out, Schopenhauer does not regard metempsychosis and palingenesis as literally true, "since in his ontology there are no such things as souls. However, as allegories, these doctrines graphically represent the idea that something fundamental to me both survives and predates the existence of the particular individual I identify myself as."

With this in mind, let us consider again the question of whether personal identity can be established between the (old) being who commits suicide and the (new) being in whom the will has persisted. The only thing that links these two beings is the "metaphysical permanence of the will" (PP II: 249). It can thus be argued that there is some kind of continuity between the old and the new being, but this continuity is not a sufficient condition

to postulate a personal identity between the two beings. It seems, therefore, reasonable to conclude with Jacquette (2005: 124) that "that death is not total annihilation for Schopenhauer is true enough; yet death remains the total annihilation of the self, soul, or subject in the psychological sense of the individual will to life or particular empirical personality." This seems to exclude the possibility of postulating personal identity after death.[52] Without this, however, the link between the old being's and the new being's sufferings cannot be established. As a consequence, Schopenhauer's argument fails to show the uselessness or futility of suicide. Or, put differently, Schopenhauer's argument shows the uselessness or futility of suicide *only* with regard to the impossibility of abolishing the thing in itself. Nonetheless, considered from the standpoint of the single individual who ceases to exist (and to suffer), suicide is not a vain act: suffering continues to exist in the world, but not the suffering of the once-alive individual.

Section 69 of *The World as Will and Representation* might be read as containing a second argument against suicide based on the alleged self-contradictory character of this act:

> Far from being a negation of the will, this [suicide] is a phenomenon of a strong affirmation of will. This is because negation is not essentially an abhorrence of the *suffering* of life, but an abhorrence of its *pleasures*. The person who commits suicide wills life, and is only unsatisfied with the conditions under which life has been given to him. Thus, when he destroys the individual appearance he is relinquishing only life, not the will to life. (WWR I: 425)[53]

Schopenhauer's argument is grounded on the psychological interpretation of the suicide's inner motivation. According to Schopenhauer's explanation, it would be a mistake to think that the real driving force of suicide is the wish to deny life. On the contrary, a person who commits suicide because she can no longer bear the burdens of life still ardently wills life. If she were able to stop willing, that is, to abhor life's pleasures, she would probably not feel the need to take her life—or, at least, she would feel this need to a lesser extent, for she would not see the unsatisfied pleasures as a source of suffering.[54] However, since she still wills life but is unable to satisfy her will (given the particular circumstances of her life), she commits suicide. The contradictory character of this act lies in the fact that the person denies life because she wills life. In a similar vein, the German philosopher Eugen Dühring points out in his 1865 work *The Value of Life* (*Der Werth des Lebens*) that suicide does not necessarily imply a condemnation of life. On the contrary, it is love of life itself (*Liebe zum Leben*) which leads someone to prefer the sacrifice of his existence to the positive sensation of the lack of what he considers to be essential for his life.[55]

Schopenhauer's argument is very convincing and plausible *qua* explanation of the suicide's psychology. However, *qua* argument against suicide, it works only in those cases in which the one who commits suicide still wills life. As Janaway (2016: 667) puts it,

> [s]uicide of this kind eliminates suffering prematurely, still under the assumption that the individual's well-being or lack of it matters, rather than realizing the final state of becoming indifferent both to individual suffering and to individual satisfaction. But what if one chose to end one's existence *because* one had become indifferent both to individual suffering and to individual satisfaction? Schopenhauer has no argument against that kind of suicide.

Another possible way of interpreting Schopenhauer's second argument would be to consider it as a simple variation of the first argument, namely the argument for the futility of suicide. According to this interpretation, the aim of the passage quoted earlier would be not so much that of stressing a possible inconsistency or self-contradiction in the act of suicide, but rather that of pointing out that ultimate freedom, which can be only achieved through a negation of the will to life, is not attained through suicide, precisely because the person who

commits suicide is relinquishing only life, not the will to life. Once again, thus, suicide would be a futile act, because it would only destroy the single phenomenon, leaving untouched the thing in itself. This is why, in the same section of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer compares a person who commits suicide to a sick person who prefers to stay sick rather than be completely cured by a painful operation:

> A person who commits suicide stops living precisely because he cannot stop willing, and the will affirms itself here through the very abolition of its appearance, because it can no longer affirm itself in any other way. But the very suffering that he avoids so emphatically could, in the form of a mortification of the will, have led to self-negation and redemption; which is why, in this respect, someone who commits suicide is like a sick person who, having started undergoing a painful operation that could cure him completely, does not allow it to be completed and would rather stay sick. Suffering approaches and, as such, introduces the possibility of negation of the will; but he repudiates it by destroying the body, the appearance of the will, so that the will might remain unbroken. (WWR I: 426–427)[56]

Before we proceed to an examination of the *cure* prescribed by Schopenhauer, some considerations concerning Schopenhauer's argument(s) against suicide can be put forward. First, as we have seen, it is not clear whether Schopenhauer puts forward just one main argument (the argument for the futility of suicide) or two different, but strictly related, arguments (the argument for the futility of suicide and the argument for the self-contradictoriness of suicide). I will leave open this question, even though Schopenhauer's claim in his essay *On Suicide* that he expounded in his chief work "the *only* relevant moral reason against suicide" (PP II: 279; my italics) speaks in favour of the first supposition. What I consider more important to point out is that, either way, Schopenhauer's rejection of suicide is problematic. Indeed, the first argument seems to be based on a questionable interpretation of the suicide's purpose, and rests on the need to postulate personal identity after death, something that appears to contradict or go against Schopenhauer's theory of palingenesis. These problems also affect the variation of the argument. On the other hand, if we consider that, in the passage quoted earlier, Schopenhauer is not putting forward a variation of the first argument, but rather an independent, second argument based on the alleged inconsistency of suicide, then we must acknowledge that this argument works only in those cases in which the person who commits suicide is still strongly attached to life and its pleasures.

More broadly, it must be noted that Schopenhauer's rejection of suicide is based on an extremely limited and reductive view of suicide.[57] As we have already seen, Schopenhauer presents the suicidal individual as someone who is typically oppressed by the burdens of life and detests the sufferings deriving from it, being no longer willing to put up with the difficult lot that has fallen on him. This characterization of the suicidal person directly derives from Schopenhauer's bleak and pessimistic worldview: our human condition is so miserable that many of us decide to take our life in order to avoid suffering any longer. Although this is certainly often the case, Schopenhauer's characterization of the motivations that lead human beings to commit suicide can be considered, from an empirical point of view, very limited and reductive, or as Beiser (2016: 62) argues, even arbitrary:

> Why should the suicide affirm life itself? Why should he protest only against his own living conditions? Perhaps the suicide has gained insight into the irremediable suffering and meaninglessness of life, and so he hates it under all circumstances? Strangely, Schopenhauer says nothing against the possibility of committing suicide *on principle*, and indeed following the principles of his own philosophy.[58]

Not only does Schopenhauer say nothing against the possibility of committing suicide following the principles of his own philosophy, but he also seems to have nothing to say

against other common types of suicide such as the unselfish or the political and religious ones. Indeed, those who take their lives for these reasons are neither necessarily oppressed by the burdens of life nor inevitably hope for liberation in death—or at least this need not be their primary motivation. This limited and reductive view of suicide is all the more surprising if we consider the extremely rich phenomenology of suicide that one can find in Schopenhauer's writings and manuscript remains—from his analysis of the role played by *diskolia* (hardness to be pleased, peevishness), supported by his reading of Esquirol's 1838 work *Des maladies mentales considérées sous les rapports médical, hygiénique et médico-legal* (PP I/Schopenhauer 2014: 285–286), to his remarks on the relation between love and suicide in *The Metaphysics of Sexual Love*.[59]

One of the consequences of this limited and reductive view is that it is not clear, at least *prima facie*, how Schopenhauer considers all those kinds of suicide (such as the ones mentioned earlier) which do not fit the restricted category of "suicide from despair or suffering." Does he consider them to be morally permitted? Or does his claim that suicide is a futile and self-contradictory act purport to have universal validity? Furthermore, what are the moral implications deriving from the fact that suicide is futile and self-contradictory? Does this mean that suicide is morally prohibited or is Schopenhauer's objection to suicide metaphysical rather than moral, as Dale Jacquette (1999: 306) claims?

To provide an answer to these questions we must bear in mind that Schopenhauer, as Birnbacher (1985: 125) has rightly pointed out, considers suicide from two different moral perspectives: the usual empirical practical ethics and the metaphysical ethics.[60] Considered from the standpoint of the empirical practical ethics, suicide is not morally objectionable: no moral *duty* is violated by self-killing and there is no moral reason for which this act should be prohibited. On the contrary, from the "higher" standpoint of the metaphysical ethics, suicide goes against the moral *ideal*, which consists in a negation of and, therefore, liberation from the will attainable only through asceticism. In this sense, suicide cannot be considered a crime but still a moral mistake and aberration; for as we have seen, it "is counter to achieving the highest moral goal insofar as it substitutes a merely illusory redemption from this world of misery for the real one" (PP II: 279).

This twofold moral approach to suicide explains away the (apparent) contradiction between Schopenhauer's objection to this act, based on its self-contradictory, vain, and even foolish character, on the one hand, and his consideration of the right to dispose of one's own person and life as an indisputable and undeniable right, on the other. Indeed, according to Schopenhauer, so long as we consider suicide from the standpoint of metaphysical ethics, we have strong reasons to refrain from taking our life. This, however, does not mean that self-killing is morally prohibited but rather that it stands in the path of the attainment of the moral ideal. In other words, self-preservation is not morally obligatory, but rather morally supererogatory.[61] On the other hand, if we consider suicide from the standpoint of the empirical practical ethics, "there is no longer a tenable moral reason to condemn suicide" (*id.*: 279). Although Schopenhauer does not directly justify this claim, we can assume that this conclusion is based on his rejection of the existence of moral duties to oneself (both duties of right and duties of love, as we have already seen), as well as on his dismissal of existing religious and philosophical arguments against suicide. Moreover, in the essay *On Suicide*, Schopenhauer clearly claims that every man has the undeniable right to freely dispose of his own person and life (*id.*: 276). This right derives from Schopenhauer's specific understanding of the nature of rights:

> The concept of *right*, just as that of *freedom*, is a *negative* one; its content is a mere negation. The concept of *wrong* is positive and is equivalent to *injury* in the broadest sense, therefore to *laesio*. As such it can concern either the person, the property or honour.—Accordingly *human rights* are easy to define: Everyone has the right to do anything that does not injure another.—The right *to* or claim *on* something means nothing more than to do it, or take it or be able to use it without in any way thereby

> injuring another: simplicity is the sign of the true [*Simplex sigillum veri*].—This sheds light on the meaninglessness of some questions, e.g. whether we have the right to take our own life. (*id.*: 218)

Schopenhauer's conclusion that every man has the right to take his own life rests on the assumption that suicide injures no one. Needless to say, this assumption is far from being self-evident. Suppose, for instance, that the parents of two minor children are thinking of taking their own life. To what extent is it possible to claim that their suicide does not injure, that is, does not inflict a direct or indirect wrong to, their children? With this regard, it is telling that in *On the Basis of Morals*, when it comes to the obligation of parents to their children, Schopenhauer argues that "whoever puts a child into the world has the *duty* to maintain it until it is capable of maintaining itself: and should this time *never* arrive, as with a blind person, cripple, cretin and the like, then the duty too never ceases" (BM: 211). If in the context of his analysis of duties of right to others Schopenhauer recognizes the duty that parents have towards their children, why does he not take into consideration the same duty when it comes to the right to take one's life? Here, it might be objected that whereas the duty of parents towards their children is a *moral* duty, the right to take our own life, which Schopenhauer is considering in *Parerga and Paralipomena*, is a *juridical* right.[62] However, to this objection, one might reply that the wrong inflicted by parents on minor children by committing suicide can be *both* moral and juridical. Moreover, Schopenhauer himself emphasizes in section 122 of *Parerga and Paralipomena* "the moral nature of right" (PP II: 218).

Having pointed out in the passage mentioned earlier (§121) that the question of whether we have the right to commit suicide is meaningless, Schopenhauer concludes as follows:

> But as concerns the claims [*Ansprüche*] that others could personally have upon us, they rest upon the condition that we are living, and therefore cease if the condition ceases. That the one who no longer wants to live for himself should now continue to live merely as a machine for the use of others is an extravagant demand. (PP II: 218)

The two arguments contained in this passage are far from solid. As Dieter Birnbacher (1985: 117) points out, the first argument is clearly fallacious. It is an obvious platitude to argue that others can have claims on us only as long as we are alive (a dead man can no longer satisfy these claims, if not through his last will and testament). However, what needs to be established here is whether the claims that others may have on us personally can interfere with or even abolish our right to take our life—a right that we may have only as long as we are alive. In other words, instead of considering the *ante mortem* period of time, during which one meditates whether or not to commit suicide, Schopenhauer erroneously takes into consideration the *post mortem* period of time, during which the claims that others might have had on us when we were alive fall to the ground. The second argument, based on the hidden premise that it is cruel or inhumane to force a human being to live as a mere machine, is certainly more compelling. There is no doubt, for instance, that many might consider irrational and/or immoral to extend by all means and for the benefit of others the life of an old and terminally ill man who no longer wants to live. However, as frequently as this might happen, this particular situation cannot be universalized; for empirical evidence abundantly shows that not all suicidal persons upon whom the demand to continue existing (based, for instance, on their responsibilities towards other people) is made "continue to live merely as a machine." Schopenhauer's argument is thus based upon an unsupported generalization.

Having considered Schopenhauer's arguments for the moral permissibility and the metaphysical futility of suicide, I will conclude the analysis of Schopenhauer's view of suicide by briefly focusing attention on what he considers the only valid alternative to suicide, namely: asceticism. As we have already seen, Schopenhauer compares man to a sick person who seeks for a cure. If the will to life is the sickness, the negation of the will is the cure.

This cure is, however, so painful that man either looks for palliatives, such as “fulfilled wishes and achieved happiness” (WWR I: 389), or prefers to stop the operation, which he had already undergone, by committing suicide (*id.*: 426–427). In both cases, the problem remains unsolved. According to Schopenhauer, there is only one, radical cure available to man: “the complete self-abolition and negation of the will, the true absence of will” (*id.*: 389). This is what Schopenhauer figuratively calls the *summum bonum* (the absolute or highest good), “the only thing that can redeem the world” (ibid.).[63]

The true salvation and redemption deriving from the negation of the will comes from the recognition of the will’s essential nothingness. According to Schopenhauer, there exist two paths through which this recognition is called into existence: (1) *cognized* and (2) *felt* or *experienced* suffering. In the former case, knowledge of the true essence of the world, which is nothing but vain strivings and perpetual suffering, becomes a “*tranquillizer* [*Quietiv*]” (*id.*: 406) of the will. As Schopenhauer puts it, “[t]he will begins turning away from life: it shrinks from each of the pleasures in which it sees life being affirmed. A human being achieves the state of voluntary renunciation, resignation, true composure, and complete will-lessness” (ibid.). This is the path that leads to asceticism, which finds expression in various forms: voluntary chastity and intentional poverty, fasting, castigation, and self-torture.[64] On the contrary, the second path that leads to the negation of the will is that of the personal experience of suffering—as distinguished from the *intellectual*, as it were, recognition of it in the world. In this case, the experienced suffering acts as a purifying agent—“the purifying flame of suffering,” as Schopenhauer puts it (*id.*: 420)—and the individual, to whom life’s final secret has been revealed, willingly renounces everything that he had previously longed for.[65] Following these paths, the individual comes to what Schopenhauer, using the words of Asmus,[66] defines as the “transcendental alteration [*transscendentale Veränderung*]” (*id.*: 425):

> When death finally arrives to dissolve the appearance of that will whose essence had already died here long ago through voluntary self-negation, with the exception of the feeble remnant that appeared as the vitality of this body, this death is highly welcome and will be received cheerfully as a longed-for redemption. Death, in this case, does not just bring an end to appearance, as in other cases; rather, the essence itself is abolished, that essence that led only a feeble existence in and through appearance; and this last, brittle bond has now been broken too. When someone comes to an end in this manner, the world comes to an end at the same time. (*id.*: 409)

It is within this specific context that Schopenhauer’s positive understanding of death by voluntary starvation, emerging at the highest levels of asceticism, must be situated. This specific type of death—which, as already mentioned, Schopenhauer considers as “a form of suicide” (*id.*: 428)—is the natural and ultimate consequence of the complete negation of the will. In this case, the will has been denied and overcome to such an extent that even the bodily need for nourishment falls away, so that if starvation is here the *biological* (i.e. the first-order) cause of death, the true (i.e. the second-order) reason of death is *moral-metaphysical*—namely, the complete detachment from the world. As Schopenhauer puts it, “[f]ar from stemming from the will to life, in this kind of suicide an ascetic of this type stops living simply because he has stopped willing altogether” (ibid.).

Among the many objections raised against Schopenhauer’s understanding of the ascetic suicide by voluntary starvation,[67] one of the more important and recurrent is that the negation of the will is conceivable only as an act of will. As Birnbacher (1985: 126) puts it, “[e]ven the refusal of nourishment against the self-preservation instinct requires force of will, conscious renunciation; it is active passivity, a wilful denial of the will. […] Every negation of the will is at the same time a product of the will.” Jacquette (1999: 312) makes the same point in even more emphatic tones: “If we admire the starving ascetic at all, it is probably because we suppose that starving oneself to death requires an extraordinary act of

will, rather than for Schopenhauer's reason involving the total suppression of will." What is more, as Fox (1980: 165) points out, Schopenhauer himself seems to defend a *voluntarist* view of self-renunciation. In section 68 of *The World as Will and Representation*, for instance, he clearly maintains that "since the body is the will itself, […] the whole will to life still exists as a possibility"; as a consequence, the negation of the will, obtained through cognition, can falter and "must constantly be regained by steady struggle" (WWR I: 418).

In order to make sense of Schopenhauer's voluntarist account of self-resignation, one might argue that when he describes the state of resignation and renunciation achieved by the ascetics as "voluntary," Schopenhauer means that this state is the consequence of a conscious and voluntarily chosen decision. Thus, as already mentioned, a different kind of intentionality distinguishes the common act of suicide, which is an expression of a strong affirmation of will, from death by starvation, which is voluntarily chosen but is at the same time the last step of a complete suppression of the will. Schopenhauer describes the state of resignation and renunciation achieved by ascetics as an attitude of "the greatest indifference towards all things" (*id.*: 407), that is, an absolute detachment from any possible object of willing, even life. But if the will must be constantly overcome, if we must unceasingly struggle with the will to life, so that "on earth nobody can have lasting peace" (*id.*: 418), not even the saints (whose life is full of "spiritual struggles, temptations, and the desertion of grace"; ibid.), can complete and true *Willenslosigkeit*, that is, absence of will or will-lessness, ever be achieved? Should we not make use of our will in order to negate our will? And should we not constantly make use of our will in order to keep ourselves in a state of resignation and renunciation?

3.4 Concluding Remarks

As we have already seen, one of the reasons for which Schopenhauer harshly criticizes the clergy's stigmatization of suicide is that, instead of reasons, the clergy has made use of mere "empty phrases or abusive words" (PP II: 277). Ironically, one of the aspects of Schopenhauer's confrontation with previous religious and philosophical arguments is precisely the absence of the same reasons, which he accuses the clergy of not providing. These arguments are variously defined as feeble sophisms, utterly groundless, wretched, and trite, but apart from these derogatory characterizations no serious or solid counterarguments are given by Schopenhauer (or at least, this is often the case). Even his dismissal of Kant's *natural law argument* against suicide is too hasty and based on a misunderstanding of this argument.

Schopenhauer's own view of suicide as a futile and self-contradictory act is, undoubtedly, better supported by arguments and reasons. Extended passages of *The World as Will and Representation* are dedicated to show how suicide, considered from a metaphysical point of view, is a vain and foolish act. Still, even if one accepted Schopenhauer's somewhat outdated metaphysical worldview and system, one might call into question the soundness of his arguments, which remain problematic and unconvincing for the reasons mentioned earlier: the questionable characterization of the suicide's purpose, the conflation of different levels of analysis, the difficulty to establish personal identity after death between the old and the new being, and the limited and reductive view of suicide, among others.

Despite these aspects, Schopenhauer's consideration and approach to suicide is nevertheless highly worthy of attention for several reasons. Following in the footsteps particularly of the ancient philosophers and of Hume, Schopenhauer's aim is to dismiss common prejudices and false beliefs concerning suicide. Against the Church, he defends a decriminalized and "de-moralized" (at least, from the standpoint of the empirical practical ethics) view of this act, displaying a benevolent and sympathetic attitude towards those who took their life—most probably, as a consequence of the traumatic experience of his father's suicide when he was only seventeen years old. His approach to suicide is also especially characterized by a dispassionate defence of one's indisputable right over one's own person

as well as by the preference for a supra-historical (the reference to the heroes and sages of antiquity) and supra-European (the reference to Hinduism and Buddhism) perspective.

Notwithstanding this open-minded and compassionate attitude, however, Schopenhauer still considers—from a metaphysical point of view—suicide as a futile and self-contradictory act. Therefore, he is opposed to it. Is this opposition really required by his metaphysical system or is Schopenhauer rather trying "to accommodate the squeamishness of traditional morality about the problem of suicide," as Jacquette (1999: 303) evocatively puts it? I will leave the verdict to the reader. However, it must be recalled that, unlike Kant, Schopenhauer does not oppose any kind of suicide, but rather speaks favourably of one particular form, namely voluntary death by starvation. It is, therefore, possible to paradoxically claim with Cosculluela (1995: 118) that, "far from being a denial of all suicide, Schopenhauer's position affirms one form of suicide."

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Footnotes

1 The fourth part of this lecture contains a section dedicated to suicide, which is almost identical to section 69 of *The World as Will and Representation*. This lecture was given in Berlin in 1820. Schopenhauer requested to schedule his classes at the same time as Hegel’s principal lectures. It was a gross mistake: “Students flocked to Hegel and ignored Schopenhauer. While Hegel enrolled around two hundred of Berlin’s approximately eleven hundred students, Schopenhauer enrolled only five. Although Schopenhauer’s name would be listed in the prospectus of lectures from 1820–1822 and 1826–1831, he never enrolled and completed a course. His academic career was a disaster” (Cartwright 2005: xxxi).

2 To these aspects, it is possible to add the following three reasons listed by Dieter Birnbacher (1985: 115): (1) Suicide represents a central point in Schopenhauer’s philosophy; (2) Schopenhauer’s ethical evaluation of suicide is extremely nuanced (according to Birnbacher, such a degree of nuanced ethical evaluation of suicide has only been reached again in modern analytic ethics); (3) Schopenhauer’s way of considering suicide is characterized by a radical absence of bias and prejudices.

3 Mainländer wrote the first volume in 1874 and the second one in 1876. The first volume was published in 1876; the second, ten years later, in 1886.

4 For an overview of Mainländer’s philosophy of redemption, see Beiser (2016: 201–228). In a section of his work dedicated to suicide, Mainländer explains that immanent philosophy (according to him, true philosophy must be purely immanent) does not encourage suicide. However, in the service of truth, it undermines the powerful reasons against it. See Mainländer (1879: 350).

5 See Beiser (2016: 122).

6 The words “vulgar bigoted England [*pöbelhaft bigotten England*]” are omitted in the Cambridge edition. As Birnbacher (1985: 121) points out, in England suicide was decriminalized only in 1961 with the *Suicide Act*, whereas in France, already in 1790, and in Prussia, in 1794. The same “disgraceful bigotry and scandalous preacher hegemony” is the reason for which Hume’s essay *On Suicide*, which Schopenhauer found very insightful, “had to be secretly smuggled from there [England], like a churlish ruse, until it found refuge abroad” (PP II: 278–279).

7 On this, see Birnbacher (1985: 127), Cartwright (2005: 167), Jacquette (2005: 140).

8 See WWR I: 428. As already mentioned, Schopenhauer considered death by starvation as a form of suicide.

9 See also WWR II: 486. Note the similarity with Hume’s essay *On Suicide*: “though death alone can put a full period to his misery, he dares not fly to this refuge, but still prolongs a miserable existence, from a vain fear lest he offend his maker, by using the power with which that beneficent being has endowed him” (Hume 1996: 316).

10 See Hume (1996: 394): “It would be easy to prove that Suicide is as lawful under the *Christian* dispensation as it was to the *heathens*. There is not a single text of scripture which prohibits it.” On this, see Minois (1995: 29–36). It is noteworthy that, in *The City of God* (I, 20), Saint Augustine reverses the perspective and argues that “it is not

without significance that, in the holy canonical books, no divine precept or permission can be discovered which allows us to bring about our own death, either to obtain immortality or to avert or avoid some evil" (Augustine 1998: 32).

11 See Birnbacher (1985: 119).

12 See PP II: 279, footnote. Schopenhauer's source here is Rousseau.

13 As shown, a similar argument can be found in Kant's *Lecture on Ethics*. See Sect. 2.2.1 of this book, dedicated to Kant's *religious argument*.

14 See Hume (1996: 321–322). See also MR I: 437.

15 Compare with Kant's *crime argument* analysed in Sect. 2.2.2 of this book.

16 Pliny's passage is quoted by Schopenhauer in Latin.

17 The allusion is to the following passage from the *Genesis* (I, 31): "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." See also WWR II: 638–640.

18 See also WWR II: 522.

19 See Aristotle (2004: 101): "A person who cuts his throat in a fit of anger is doing this voluntarily, contrary to correct reason, and the law does not allow this; so he is acting unjustly. But towards whom? Surely towards the city, not himself, since he suffers voluntarily, and no one voluntarily suffers injustice?"

20 As mentioned in the previous chapter, for an overview of the Stoic view of suicide, see Rist (1977: 233–255).

21 Schopenhauer makes clear that his conception of practical reason should not be confused with Kant's. On this, see WWR I: 112.

22 Here are only some of the critiques advanced by Schopenhauer: Kant's assumption of the existence of moral laws (without proofs) involves a begging of the question; the concept of absolute ought is a contradiction in terms; his formal ethics is unkind and abstract; his ethics is devoid of any secure foundation and is essentially a conversion of theological morality disguised in abstract formulae; reason is something secondary: the real essence of the human being is will. On this, see particularly Young (1984).

23 See section 3 of *On the Basis of Morals*, in which Schopenhauer motivates his decision.

24 See section 23 of the *Doctrine of the Elements of Ethics* in *The Metaphysics of Morals*.

25 The principle, attributed to the Latin jurist Ulpian, originally reads *nulla iniuria est, quae in volentem fiat* (D. 47, 10, 1, 5).

26 To strengthen his argumentation, Schopenhauer quotes the following passage from Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* (MM, 6: 386): "What everyone already wants unavoidably, of his own accord, does not come under the concept of *duty*." Here Kant specifically refers to one's own happiness.

27 For a detailed analysis of Schopenhauer's argument and the questions that it raises, see Jaquette (2007) and Shapshay (2019: 48–52). See also the chapter *On the Possibility of Knowing the Thing-in-Itself* from the second volume of *The Will as World and Representation* (§18). Shapshay (2019: 50–51) rightly recalls that, in identifying the thing in itself as will, Schopenhauer is using a *denominatio a potiori*, that is, "a denomination from the superior term that gives the concept of will a broader scope than it has had before" (WWR I: 135).

28 On this, see particularly Schopenhauer's 1836 essay *On the Will in Nature*.

29 See WWR I: 154–155: "I understand by *Idea* every determinate and fixed *level of the will's objectification*, to the extent that it is a thing in itself and thus foreign to all multiplicity; indeed, these levels relate to individual things as their eternal forms or archetypes." On Schopenhauer on Platonic ideas, see White (2012) and Mann (2017), as well as chapter 29 of the second volume of *The Will as World and Representation*.

30 According to Schopenhauer, this struggle reveals itself with the most terrible clarity in the human race, as best synthesized in the Latin maxim *homo homini lupus* (man is a wolf to man). See WWR I: 172.

31 For a critique of this position, see Simmel (1991: 53–58).

32 For a critique of Schopenhauer's "pain or boredom" argument, see Young (2003: 41–43). See also Janaway's analysis of Schopenhauer's "argument from the ubiquity of suffering within the structure of willing" (Janaway 1999: 327–335).

33 At the same time, it should be recalled that Schopenhauer developed a *eudemonology* ("the art of living life as pleasantly and happily as possible"; PP I: 273) in his *Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life* and worked on a treatise on the art of being happy. Nevertheless, Schopenhauer's eudemonology is to be understood as a *pessimist* or *negative* eudemonology, that is, as a theory of happiness whose aim is to minimize suffering rather than maximize happiness. On this, see Neymeyr (1996) and Debona (2016).

34 See Plutarch (*Moralia*, *Consolatio ad Apollonium*, sec. 27): "So, for example, they say that Silenus, after the hunt in which Midas of yore had captured him, when Midas questioned and inquired of him what is the best thing for mankind and what is the most preferable of all things, was at first unwilling to tell, but maintained a stubborn silence. But when at last, by employing every device, Midas induced him to say something to him, Silenus, forced to speak, said: 'Ephemeral offspring of a travailing genius and of harsh fortune, why do you force me to speak what it were better for you men not to know? For a life spent in ignorance of one's own woes is most free from grief. But for men it is utterly impossible that they should obtain the best thing of all, or even have any share in its nature (for the best thing for all men and women is not to be born); however, the next best thing to this, and the first of those to which man can attain, but nevertheless only the second best, is, after being born, to die as quickly as possible'" (Plutarch 1928: 179). Plutarch is here quoting from Aristotle's *Eudemus or On the Soul*, a lost dialogue. As will be shown in the next chapter, Nietzsche discusses the wisdom of Silenus——via Schopenhauer——in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Although Schopenhauer does not make explicit reference to the wisdom of Silenus, there is little doubt that he shares this view (indeed, it is symptomatic that, in his study on pessimism in German philosophy, Beiser (2016: 45) defines Schopenhauer precisely as "the modern Silenus"). See the following passages: "Our existence is happiest when we are least able to feel it: from which it follows that it would be better not to exist at all" (WWR II: 590); "If therefore the evil were a hundred times less in the world than is the case, then the mere existence of evil would still be sufficient to ground a truth that can be expressed in different ways although only ever somewhat indirectly, namely that we should be sorry rather than glad about the existence of the world; that its non-existence would be preferable to its existence; that it is something that fundamentally should not be, etc." (*id.*: 591–592); "There is in fact no goal to our existence except the recognition that we would have been better off not existing" (*id.*: 620). The same position is defended by Mainländer (1879: 208) who, in his *Philosophy of Redemption*, explicitly claims that "*not to be is better than to be* [*Nichtsein ist besser als Sein*]." See also Leopardi's *Dialogue between Malambruno and Farfarello* (*Moral Essays* [*Operette morali*]), where Malambruno claims that, "in absolute terms, not living is always better than living" (Leopardi 1982: 103). For a recent defence of what is commonly known as *anti-natalism*, see Benatar (2006). See also Cioran (1976).

35 For an analysis of what is commonly known as the *gift argument*, see Battin (1996: 34–38) and Cholbi (2011: 47–53).

36 On this, see Janaway (1999: 319) and Cartwright (2005: 125 and 2010: 4, n. 11; 534, n. 31). In addition to the passage from *Adversaria* (§66) mentioned by Cartwright, I found Schopenhauer referring to his own philosophy as pessimism in *Pandectae* II, 49, as well as in the letters to Julius Frauenstädt (17 February 1853 and 15 July 1855) and to David Asher (16 June 1860).

37 See Shapshay (2019: 75).

38 Schopenhauer also speaks in exact similar terms of "*fuga mortis*" ("flight from death") in WWR II: 485.

39 *Topica* III, 2. See Aristotle 1960: 399: "For living a good life is better than merely living."

40 Schopenhauer considers the "horrors of death [*Schrecknisse des Todes*]", which stand "as guards before the exit gate" (PP II: 279), also in his essay *On Suicide*. In this essay, he argues that "perhaps there is no one living who would not have made an end of his life if this end were something purely negative, a sudden cessation of existence. —Only there is something positive involved, namely the destruction of the body. This scares us off precisely because the body is the appearance of the will to life" (*id.*: 279–280).

41 As Singh (2007: 29) points out, "the contemplation of death remains the muse of Schopenhauer's own philosophical system." On Schopenhauer on death, besides Singh's study, see Jacquette (1999).

42 See Diogenes Laertius, X, 125; 1925: 651. In the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, however, Schopenhauer makes clear that "it is not pain that we fear in death [...] what we fear in death is in fact the termination of the individual" (WWR I: 309). For an analysis of Epicurus' argument, see Wittwer (2003: 234–241). For an analysis of Schopenhauer's Epicurean arguments, see Janaway (2017: 3711–3713).

43 For a similar argument, see letter 77 of Seneca's *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* (LXXVII, 11; Seneca 1920: 175). It is noteworthy that in his book *The Trouble with Being Born* Cioran puts forward the following counterargument: "Why fear the nothing in store for us when it is no different from the nothing which preceded us: this argument of the Ancients against the fear of death is unacceptable as consolation. *Before*, we had the luck not to exist; now we exist, and it is this particle of existence, hence of misfortune, which dreads death" (Cioran 1976: 95). In passing, it may be also mentioned that a similar argument to the one put forward by Schopenhauer in the quoted passage was also used by the Italian poet Torquato Tasso to cheer the philosopher Bernardino Telesio for the loss of his son. Tasso asked Telesio whether he regretted, before his son was born, the fact that he did not exist yet. Telesio answered that he did not. So, Tasso asked, why was Telesio now regretting the fact that his son did no longer exist (see Manso 1825: 262).

44 Schopenhauer defines this "return to the womb of nature" as "*cessio bonorum* [surrender of goods]" (WWR II: 486), an expression derived from Roman Law which calls to mind the religious argument against suicide based on the property analogy (see the analysis of Kant's *religious argument* in Sect. 2.2.1 of this book).

45 See Homer, *The Iliad*, VI, 146: "Even as are the generations of leaves, such are those also of men" (Homer 1924: 273).

46 On Schopenhauer's consoling view of death, see Janaway (2017).

47 To convey the idea that birth and death touch only the individual, not the will, Schopenhauer makes use of the same metaphor in section 65: “Death […] is like the setting of the sun that only seems to be devoured by night, but in truth, as the source of all light, burns without pause, bringing new days to new worlds, forever rising and forever setting” (WWR I: 393). Like the sun, the will, which lies outside of time and, therefore, remains untouched by beginnings and endings, objectifies itself without pause and brings new individuals to life. This is why, Schopenhauer concludes, suicide is no solution.

48 See Shakespeare (2009: 60): “To be, or not to be, that is the question, / Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, / And by opposing, end them.”

49 To convey the idea of the futility of the act of suicide that destroys the single appearance but leaves the thing in itself untouched, Schopenhauer uses the image of the rainbow that “remains stable however rapidly the drops that support it at any given moment might change” (WWR I: 426). See also MR I: 433, where suicide is defined as “the master-stroke of *Maya*.”

50 See also MR III: 108–109.

51 See also Cosculluela (1995: 114).

52 On this, see Birnbacher (1985: 125). See also Fox (1980: 167): “though Schopenhauer categorically rejects all attempts to establish personal survival of death and adds that consolation in the face of death cannot be derived from this source, he proceeds nevertheless to violate the spirit, if not the letter, of his own dicta.”

53 This argument recalls Kant’s natural law argument, according to which the suicide’s maxim cannot be thought as a universal law of nature without contradiction (see Sect. 2.3.1 of this book). On this, see Jacquette (1999: 305 and 2000: 48). See also Gómez Alonso (2018: 306–308). As seen in the previous chapter, Kant puts forward two more arguments that emphasize the self-contradictory aspect of suicide, namely the freedom argument and the subject of duty argument (respectively, Sect. 2.2.3 and 2.3.3 of this book).

54 Needless to say, one can abhor life’s pleasures, but still find the burdens of life unbearable and, thus, choose to commit suicide.

55 See Dühring (1877: 176–177).

56 See MR I: 530–531.

57 For a similar critique, see Trogan (2013: 8).

58 See also Jacquette (1999: 309).

59 See chapter 44 of the *Supplements* to *The World as Will and Representation*.

60 See also Cartwright’s distinction between a broader and a narrower sense of morality in Schopenhauer (Cartwright 1999).

61 See Birnbacher (1985: 125–126).

62 Section 121 belongs, indeed, to the essay *On Jurisprudence and Politics*.

63 On this, see Janaway (2016).

64 In section 68 of the first part of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer defines asceticism as follows: "I understand by it, in the narrow sense, this *deliberate* breaking of the will by forgoing what is pleasant and seeking out what is unpleasant, choosing a lifestyle of penitence and self-castigation for the constant mortification of the will."

65 As Shapshay (2019: 119) points out, this distinction might be misleading. Schopenhauer's view is that "*denial of the will-to-life per se depends on knowledge*; the real difference between the two paths is that in the second, but not the first, that knowledge is acquired as a result of personal suffering." See WWR I: 427: "The will to life itself cannot be suppressed by anything except *cognition*."

66 Pseudonym of Matthias Claudius. See Cartwright (2010: 29–30).

67 On this, see particularly Jacquette (1999: 312–314). On Schopenhauer on freedom from will, see chapter 11 of Janaway (1989), especially pp. 283–285.

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4. Friedrich Nietzsche: A Free Death at the Right Time

Paolo Stellino[1] ✉
(1) Nova Institute of Philosophy, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, LISBOA, Portugal

✉ **Paolo Stellino**
Email: paolo.stellino@fcsh.unl.pt

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"Just as Schopenhauer recognizes only the negation of life as an absolute value, so Nietzsche acknowledges only one thing: Life." With these words, Georg Simmel (1991: 136) synthesizes the antithesis existing between Schopenhauer's pessimistic worldview and Nietzsche's Dionysian affirmation of life. Nothing could be more different from Schopenhauer's exhortation towards asceticism and self-resignation than Nietzsche's joyous *amor fati* and "yes to life." Yet, Nietzsche's philosophy would be unimaginable without Schopenhauer. Indeed, it was the discovery of *The World as Will and Representation* in a Leipzig bookstore in 1865 that led Nietzsche to turn from philology to philosophy. Schopenhauer's metaphysics clearly lies in the background of Nietzsche's first published book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, and in the third *Untimely Meditation*, Nietzsche speaks of Schopenhauer as "one of the teachers and taskmasters of whom I can boast" (SE, 1/Nietzsche 1997). It is with the publication of the first volume of *Human, All Too Human* in 1878 that Nietzsche definitively dissociated himself from the philosophy of his teacher. Nonetheless, Schopenhauer continued to exert his influence upon his thinking, despite Nietzsche's attempt at masking or minimizing it.[1]

Nietzsche's philosophical confrontation with suicide begins with Schopenhauer. As will be shown, it also ends with him. In a letter to Carl von Gersdorff dating from the end of November/beginning of December 1867, Nietzsche tells his friend about the suicide of Julius Kretzschmer, their former professor in Schulpforta.[2] Kretzschmer's suicide was connected, directly or indirectly, with Schopenhauer's philosophy:

> Third, I will tell you of an event with which Schopenhauer is also remotely connected, even if he is not, as well-paid schoolmasters assert, the cause of it. That is the unfortunate suicide of Kretzschmer in Schulpforta. The reasons are really unknown, or are being well hushed up. There is something enigmatic about the fact that this excellent and conscientious man had become engaged three months before and so has made a young girl unhappy too. You know that he was a follower of Schopenhauer; and the last time he and I were together in Almrich, we discussed Schopenhauer's attitude to suicide. (L, #554)[3]

As this letter shows, Nietzsche was familiar with Schopenhauer's view of suicide. This is not surprising if we take into account Nietzsche's fascination for Schopenhauer and, particularly, for *The World as Will and Representation*. A posthumous note dating from the spring of 1870 bears testimony that Nietzsche was not only familiar with Schopenhauer's view of suicide but that he also meditated on this subject:

> Suicide cannot be refuted philosophically. It is the only way to free oneself from the actual configuration of the will. Why should it not be permitted to throw away something that the most accidental natural phenomenon can smash at any minute? A cold breeze can be fatal. Is not the whim, which makes one throw away life, in any case more rational than a breeze? It is not, after all, absolute stupidity that makes one throw it away.
>
> The surrender to the world process [*Weltprozeß*] is as stupid as the individual negation of the will, because the former is simply a euphemism for the process of humanity and with its extinction nothing is gained with regard to the will. Humanity is something as little as the individual.—Even if suicide is only an experiment! Why not?
>
> Apart from this, nature has ensured that not too many take a step towards carrying out this act, and only the fewest will do it out of pure knowledge that "everything is vanity."—Nature entraps us in all directions—to duties, to gratitude; all these are snares of the almighty will, in which we are imprisoned. (PF 3[5], spring 1870)[4]

As this note shows, Nietzsche criticizes Schopenhauer's philosophical refutation of suicide while at the same time sharing his metaphysics of the will. According to Nietzsche, the Schopenhauerian solution to the problem of the tragedy of life—the individual negation of the will—is stupid (*dumm*). But stupid is also the solution proposed by Eduard von Hartmann in his book *Philosophy of the Unconscious* (1869), namely the individual's surrender to the world process. Hartmann, who had put together Hegel's teleological philosophy of history with Schopenhauer's pessimism, claimed in his very successful book that non-being could not be achieved through the individual negation of the will, as Schopenhauer thought. On the contrary, the denial of the will had to be collective, the task of the individual being to facilitate the world process towards its *telos*: the final redemption from misery of volition into the painless state of non-being and non-willing.[5]

In his *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, von Hartmann (1884: 129) claimed that "the endeavour after *individual* negation of the will is *just as foolish and useless*, nay, still more foolish, than *suicide*, because it only attains the same end more slowly and painfully: abolition of *this* appearance without altering the essence."[6] In other words, according to von Hartmann, Schopenhauer's solution to the problem of the tragedy of existence (the individual negation of the will) was as foolish as, if not even more foolish than, suicide (the solution criticized by Schopenhauer). In the posthumous fragment quoted earlier, Nietzsche clearly alludes to von Hartmann's claim, but reverses the perspective: von Hartmann's solution (the surrender to the world process) is as stupid as Schopenhauer's is. Indeed, the only way to free oneself from the actual configuration of the will is suicide.

Nietzsche's argument, which recalls Hume's claim that "the lives of men are shortened or extended by the smallest accident of air" (Hume 1996: 318), can be rephrased as follows: if the most accidental natural phenomenon can put an end to the life of a human being, thus freeing one from an existence full of suffering, why should it not be permitted to commit voluntarily suicide, which would lead to the same result? Even if we committed suicide because of a temporary mood state, would this act not be more rational than the accidental death caused by an insignificant natural phenomenon? From a Schopenhauerian perspective, one might object that Nietzsche seems to be missing the point of Schopenhauer's argument. First, as shown, Schopenhauer's claim is not that suicide is not permitted, but rather that it is vain and futile.[7] Second, according to Schopenhauer, suicide is vain and futile because it leaves the will untouched, and thus does not provide any radical solution to the problems deriving from the human condition. To this, one might reply that Nietzsche does not claim that suicide breaks the will, but rather that it constitutes the only way to free the individual "from the *actual* [*augenblicklichen*] configuration of the will" (my italics).[8] In other words, suicide obtains the same effect of a death caused by the most fortuitous natural event: the annihilation of the individual. Since the former (even in its most

impulsive and abrupt form) is at all events more rational than the latter, Nietzsche concludes that there are no philosophical reasons for which suicide should not be permitted.

Setting aside the question about the cogency and plausibility of Nietzsche's argumentation as well as the peculiarity of its context (that is, Schopenhauer's metaphysics), it is important to call attention to an aspect that lies at the heart of Nietzsche's later view of suicide: his conviction that there are no philosophical and, above all, moral valid reasons to refute suicide. On the contrary, as will be shown, Nietzsche asserts that suicide is, on certain occasions, a wholly rational act. In this sense, it is significant that the early Nietzsche defends the permissibility of suicide by emphasizing its rational aspect, that is, by putting the accent precisely on one of the aspects that he will later highlight in his defence of suicide.

On a more general note, Nietzsche is a convinced advocate of one's right to choose the time and manner in which death should occur. As he puts it in the first volume of *Human, All Too Human*, in a chapter dedicated to the history of the moral sensations, "*[p]revention of suicide*.—There exists a right by which we take a man's life but none by which we take from him his death: this is mere cruelty" (HH I, 88/Nietzsche 1996). As mentioned, according to Nietzsche, there are no metaphysical, religious, or moral valid reasons for which we should prohibit suicide. For what concerns the first set of reasons, as we have seen, the early Nietzsche rejects both Schopenhauer's and von Hartmann's argumentations against the foolishness or uselessness of suicide. In any case, starting from the publication of the first volume of *Human, All Too Human* in 1878, "metaphysical philosophy" will be replaced by "historical philosophy" (HH I, 1), that is, metaphysics will be no longer a preoccupation for Nietzsche—except as a target of debunking. The second set of reasons, the religious ones, is the specific focus of Nietzsche's critique (in this, he follows his "educator" Schopenhauer). According to Nietzsche, religions (particularly Christian religion) are responsible for having denaturalized suicide, turning it into an act either prohibited by God or dependent on his will. Finally, Nietzsche also rejects the third set of reasons, namely, the moral ones. The following posthumous note from the middle period leaves no doubt about it: "There are only reasons against suicide on an individual basis [*individuell*]. […] Moral reasons, none whatsoever" (PF 21[24], end of 1876–summer 1887). It is precisely this *demoralized* view of suicide that makes Nietzsche's stance on voluntary death differ from the Stoics', despite the many similarities that, as will be shown, both views share.

Throughout his philosophical career, Nietzsche dealt with the issue of suicide (more or less directly) on several occasions. As tends to be the case with him, in his works we cannot find a methodical or systematic approach to the question at hand, only some remarks and observations which, for the most part, are not connected to each other. Nevertheless, if despite this fragmented approach we piece together the passages devoted to this topic, it is possible to derive a unitary picture that, as will be shown, remains essentially unchanged from *Human, All Too Human* (1878) to *Twilight of the Idols* (1888). What is characteristic of Nietzsche's view of suicide is that he seems to approach this topic from two different points of view. On the one hand, he considers the question of the justifiability or plausibility of suicide. His conclusion is that, in certain specific situations, voluntary death can be a fully rational and natural choice. Within this context, he defends the idea of a free death at the right time. On the other hand, Nietzsche considers suicide from what might be defined as a proto-existentialist standpoint: the problem is to judge whether life is or is not worth living in a world devoid of meaning and purpose. These two viewpoints are obviously connected with each other. However, given the significant difference between the question at stake in the first and in the second context, in what follows I will consider both aspects separately (the former in Sects. 4.1 and 4.2, the latter in Sect. 4.3).

Before proceeding to the examination of Nietzsche's stance on voluntary death, however, attention must be paid to a personal aspect that contributes to the understanding and, to a certain extent, the contextualization of Nietzsche's view of suicide. For Nietzsche, suicide was not only a philosophical subject but, at least for a period of his life, a concrete existential possibility. It is well known that Nietzsche fell in love with the young Russian Lou

von Salomé. Nietzsche became acquainted with Salomé in Rome, in April 1882. He was thirty-seven, she was twenty-one. Nietzsche soon proposed marriage to her but Salomé rejected his proposal, suggesting instead an intellectual companionship with him and Paul Rée, a friend of Nietzsche and author of *The Origin of the Moral Sensations* (1877). A famous picture taken in Lucerne portrays the "trinity" (Nietzsche, Rée, and Salomé) with the young Russian as the coachman, holding the whip. After several plans, meetings, and letters, eventually, the ideal of the intellectual companionship was never realized and Salomé departed with Rée.[9] Nietzsche fell into a deep depression and thought several times about taking his life. It is precisely in this context that Nietzsche wrote down the following note: "The thought of suicide is a strong means of comfort. It helps one get through the 'evil nights'" (PF 3[1], summer-autumn 1882). The same note was later published, in a slightly modified way, in section 157 of *Beyond Good and Evil*.

The correspondence bears abundant testimony to Nietzsche's disheartened condition during the winter of 1882–83. Around 20 December 1882, Nietzsche wrote the following lines to Rée and Salomé:

> Each morning I despair how I shall outlive the day. I do not sleep anymore. It is no use to hike eight hours. […] This evening I will take so much opium as to lose my mind. […] Do not be too much worried about the outbreaks of my megalomania or of my injured vanity—and even if I should happen one day to take my life accidentally, there would not be much to grieve about. What do my fantasies matter to you and Lou? Consider me, the two of you, as a semilunatic with a sore head who has been totally bewildered by long solitude. I have come to this, I think, judicious insight into the state of things after taking, *out of desperation*, a huge dose of opium. (L, #360)

About two months afterward, on 10 February 1883, Nietzsche still complained to his friend Franz Overbeck about his desperate condition:

> I will not conceal it from you, I am in a bad way. It is night all around me again; I feel as if the lightning had flashed—I *was* for a short time *completely* in my element and in my light. And now it has passed. I think I shall inevitably go to pieces, unless something happens—I have no idea *what*. […] Not for a moment have I been able to forget, for instance, that my mother called me a disgrace to my dead father.[10] I shall say nothing of other examples—but the barrel of a revolver is for me now a source of relatively pleasant thoughts. (L, #373)

In the middle of this crisis, Nietzsche received the news of the death of Richard Wagner on 13 February 1883. Their paths had already departed some years before but Nietzsche was nonetheless affected by the news. In addition, physical problems plagued him. "Things are very bad indeed," Nietzsche wrote to Overbeck on 22 February 1883. "My health is back where it was three years ago. Everything is kaput, my stomach so much so that it even refuses the sedatives—in consequence of which I have sleepless, terribly tormented nights and, a further consequence, a profound nervousness" (L, #384).

Nietzsche's condition began to improve from the spring of 1883. In a retrospective look dating from mid-July, Nietzsche confessed to Ida Overbeck, Franz's wife, that that had been the "heaviest and sickest winter" of his life and that he had endured "five times more than what is sufficient to bring an ordinary person to suicide" (L, #438). What had saved him was his philosophical activity, more precisely, the writing of the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, as he himself recognized in the same letter to Ida Overbeck: "without the *goals* of my work and the *inexorability* [*Unerbittlichkeit*] of such goals, I would not be alive. In this regard, the name of my saviour is: Zarathustra, my son Zarathustra!" (ibid.). As will be shown, these words acquire even more significance in the context of the relation that Nietzsche establishes in the speech *On Free Death* (first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* Nietzsche 2006a) between one's goal and the possibility of dying a timely death. Even more

significant and remarkable is the fact that, while deeply depressed and suffering from physical problems, Nietzsche was nonetheless able to write one of the most joyous and life-affirming works of the whole history of Western philosophy.

4.1 Voluntary versus Involuntary Death

If one considers the published writings, section 80 of the first volume of *Human, All Too Human* contains the first discussion and defence of suicide:

> *Old age and death*.—Disregarding the demands made by religion one might well ask: why should it be more laudable for an old man who senses the decline of his powers to await his slow exhaustion and dissolution than in full consciousness to set himself a limit? Suicide is in this case a wholly natural and obvious action, which as a victory for reason ought fairly to awaken reverence: and did awaken it in those ages when the heads of Greek philosophy and the most upright Roman patriots were accustomed to die by suicide. On the other hand, the desire to carry on existing from day to day, anxiously consulting physicians and observing scrupulous rules of conduct, without the strength to get any closer to the actual goal of one's life, is much less respectworthy.—The religions are rich in excuses for evading the demand of suicide: in this way they ingratiate themselves with those who are in love with life. (HH I, 80)

The first aspect that needs to be emphasized is that Nietzsche approaches here the theme of suicide from a very specific perspective: that of the old man who senses the decline of his powers. We must keep this clarification in mind if we aim to understand Nietzsche's view of suicide. For Nietzsche's intention is not that of claiming indiscriminately that every kind of suicide may be considered rational. On the contrary, his defence of voluntary death seems to concern mainly, if not exclusively, old men—or, at least, men whose life cycle has come to an end due to old age or sickness. So, for instance, when Nietzsche presents his idea of rational death in section 185 of *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, he uses the metaphor of the machine that has completed his work. Similarly, when Zarathustra teaches his free death, he begins his speech by saying that many die too late, but also clarifying that "some die too early" (Z I, *On Free Death*). In other words, one of the essential conditions of Nietzsche's conception of suicide is its *timeliness*.

The idea of taking leave of life *at the right moment* is already present in Roman Stoicism. In his *Consolation to Marcia*, Seneca invites Marcia to "reflect on how great a blessing a timely death [*opportuna mors*] provides, on how many have been harmed by too long a life" (Seneca 2007: 75). Most probably influenced by the Stoic view,[11] Nietzsche puts strong emphasis on the idea of dying at the right time (*zur rechten Zeit*): "Die at the right time: thus Zarathustra teaches it" (Z I, *On Free Death*). How is this call for death at the right time to be understood? First, it is interesting to note that Nietzsche establishes a clear parallelism between the way one lives and the way one dies: "To be sure, how could the person who never lives at the right time ever die at the right time?" (ibid.). Death becomes the mirror of one's life: only he who has fully and courageously lived his life is able to desire to take leave at the right time. Thus conceived, death represents not the opposite of life, but rather its coronation: "For love of *life*," Nietzsche writes in the *Twilight of the Idols*, "one ought to want death to be different, free, conscious, no accident, no ambush…" (TI, *Raids*, 36/Nietzsche 1998).

Zarathustra himself recognizes that to leave at the right moment is a difficult art. The question, then, is: how does one know that the time has come? Nietzsche gives some indications, the most important of which is without doubt the reference to the goal and the heir: "Whoever has a goal and an heir wants death at the right time for his goal and heir. And out of reverence for his goal and heir he will no longer hang withered wreaths in the sanctuary of life" (Z I, *On Free Death*). According to this conception, free death is seen as the peaceful and respectable completion of a meaningful life, which has achieved its goal and

now finds its ideal continuation in an heir.[12] He who has become too old for his "truths and victories" says "no" when it is no longer time to say "yes" and takes leave of life like a ripe apple falling from the tree when it is time.

In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche gives other important indications that can be helpful to understand his concept of a timely death. According to Nietzsche, one has to die proudly when, for different reasons, "it is no longer possible to live proudly" (TI, *Raids*, 36). Only in this way, it is possible to carry death "brightly and joyfully, among children and witnesses" (ibid.). In other words, anticipating and freely choosing the moment of death, one has the possibility of taking leave *from* and *with* those whom one most cherishes, being spiritually present ("the one who is taking his leave *is still there*," Nietzsche writes; ibid.) instead of partially or completely unconscious. What is more, by so dying, one has also the possibility of making "a true assessment of achievements and aspirations, a *summation* of life" (ibid.).[13]

Going back to section 80 (first volume of *Human, All Too Human*) quoted earlier, there is another important aspect that needs to be emphasized: Nietzsche is not asking whether suicide would be a rational choice for an old man who senses the decline of his powers (at least, not directly), but rather why natural death should be more laudable than voluntary death for a man in such a situation. In other words, his aim is to call into question the modern prejudice in favour of life and the negative evaluation of suicide. To this end, he points out that this negative appraisal is the result of a specific evaluative historical perspective: in other times, for instance those of ancient Greece and the Roman Empire, suicide was regarded with different eyes and awoke reverence, not contempt.[14] Nietzsche also claims that this negative view of suicide is the direct consequence of the influence exerted by religions (particularly Christian religion). His charge against religions is that they created excuses for evading the demand of suicide that came from people who suffered.[15] Indeed, according to Nietzsche, this is precisely the meaning of religion, that is, to keep the "*failures* and the miserable ones" alive through hope and fear and to prevent them from committing suicide (PF 25[300], spring 1884). In the case of Christianity, Nietzsche gives a specific explanation for this social-historical phenomenon:

> When Christianity came into existence the inclination to suicide was very strong—Christianity turned it into a lever of its power: it allowed only two kinds of suicide, dressed them up with the highest dignity and the highest hopes and forbade all others in a terrible manner. But martyrdom and the ascetic's slow suicide [*Selbstentleibung*] were permitted. (GS, 131/Nietzsche 2001)

According to Nietzsche's interpretation, Christianity was the revolt of all those people who had a reason to commit suicide, but lacked the courage to do it. They searched a reason to keep themselves alive and found it in the new religion.[16] In other words, what Christianity did was to redirect the nihilistic tendencies lurking within the ill-constituted and sick. Through the idea of "the immortal private person" and the hope of resurrection, Christianity deterred them from "the *deed of nihilism*, which is suicide—it substituted slow suicide: gradually a petty, poor, but durable life; gradually a quite ordinary, bourgeois, mediocre life, etc." (PF 14[9], spring 1888). By so doing, however, Christianity perverted the work of *selective nature* (ibid.). Only within this context it is possible to understand Nietzsche's claim that a "thoroughgoing *practical nihilism*" should be encouraged, "a severe form of really contagious nihilism: such as teaches and practices voluntary death with scientific conscientiousness" (ibid.).[17]

Nietzsche blames Christianity also and above all for having turned the hour of death into a "pitiful and ghastly comedy" (TI, *Raids*, 36) and for having falsified the natural perception of death, particularly of voluntary death. As he clearly puts it in *Twilight of the Idols*, "[h]ere we must defy all the cowardliness of prejudice and establish above all the correct, i.e. physiological appreciation of so-called *natural* death: which is ultimately just another

‘unnatural’ one, a suicide. One never perishes at the hand of anyone but oneself” (ibid.). By an inversion of perspective, voluntary death is presented as rational and “a wholly natural and obvious action” (HH I, 80), whereas natural death is irrational, a “suicide of nature” (WS, 185), which is worthy of no glorification outside the religious mode of thinking. By so doing, Nietzsche fights against the denaturalization (*Entnatürlichung*) of suicide orchestrated by Christianity over the centuries[18]—a fight that can be fully appreciated and understood only in the wider context of his relentless struggle against Christianity and its anti-natural morality, with its *castratism* of passions and its practice *inimical to life*.[19]

Nietzsche argues for the naturalness of voluntary death and the unnaturalness of natural death in different ways. In section 80 of *Human, All Too Human*, his strategy is to juxtapose the limit to life set by oneself to the limit to life set by nature. Whereas the first limit is set in full consciousness and as a result of a rational choice, the second limit is independent of one’s will and implies a “slow exhaustion and dissolution” (HH I, 80). If the first option is a sign of strength and courage—and for this reason should awake reverence and respect—the second is the consequence of the fear of death, which brings “the desire to carry on [*fortzufristen*] existing from day to day, anxiously consulting physicians and observing scrupulous rules of conduct” (ibid.).[20]

Nietzsche proceeds by antithesis in section 185 of *The Wanderer and His Shadow* as well, but this time the focus is more on the relation existing between the naturalness of a given act (in this case, death) and its rationality: indeed, the irrationality of involuntary death (“natural death is death independent of all reason, actual *irrational* death” (WS, 185), Nietzsche writes) seems to entail its “unnaturalness” (as Nietzsche puts it, “natural death is the suicide of nature”; ibid.).[21] Whereas it is clear why Nietzsche thinks that natural death is irrational—in it, the body (the irrational part of the human being) determines the moment at which the soul or the mind (the rational part of it) shall die—Nietzsche’s step from irrationality to unnaturalness remains obscure. In the same section, Nietzsche clarifies that “natural death is the suicide of nature, *that is to say* the annihilation of the rational being by the irrational to which it is tied” (ibid.; my italics). This clarification instantiates again the initial point, namely, that natural death is irrational. However, despite Nietzsche’s use of the German “*das heisst* [that is],” the same clarification does not shed light on the reason for which the irrationality of voluntary death (“the annihilation of the rational being by the irrational to which it is tied”) would entail its “unnaturalness” (“the suicide of nature”). This is certainly far from being self-evident.

In order to show the irrationality of natural (involuntary) death, Nietzsche resorts to a (for him, unusual) dichotomy between a rational and an irrational being (*vernünftiges/unvernünftiges Wesen*).[22] As mentioned, according to Nietzsche, it is irrational that the annihilation of the rational being should be determined by the irrational being. On the contrary, the rational being should decide when to die independently from the irrational being: this would be a truly rational death. To strengthen his argumentation, Nietzsche makes use of two metaphors: (i) the husk and the kernel, and (ii) the prison warder and the prisoner, a Platonic reminiscence[23]:

> Natural death is death independent of all reason, actual *irrational* death, in which the wretched substance of the husk determines how long the kernel shall or shall not continue to exist: in which therefore the stunted, often sick and thick-witted prison warder is the master who decides [*bezeichnet*] the moment at which his noble prisoner shall die. (WS, 185)

Nietzsche’s conclusion is that only from a religious perspective can natural death appear to be rational. For, in this case, the command to die comes from the higher reason (God), to which the lower reason (man) has to submit.[24] Outside this way of thinking, involuntary (natural) death can only be considered as irrational.

Nietzsche's argument for the irrationality of natural death can be reconstructed as follows:

(P1) Natural death is death independent of all reason.
(P2) Death independent of all reason is an irrational death.
(C) Natural death is an irrational death.

The universality of the first premise of the argument might be questioned. As we know, Nietzsche claims that natural death is death independent of all reason because it is the irrational being which *decides* (i.e. determines) the moment in which the rational being should die. However, is this really so? Imagine, for instance, the case of a terminally ill patient who is considering the possibility of committing suicide. She knows that she will soon die but there is no possibility of quantifying exactly her remaining lifetime. She thus faces a difficult dilemma: on the one hand, if she commits suicide, she will avoid further physical and psychological pain and remain faithful to her convictions about life and death. On the other hand, if she awaits natural death, she will have more precious time (maybe some weeks) to spend with her beloved husband and children. After having thoughtfully considered both options, she opts for the second horn of the dilemma. Now, can we really affirm that her death will be a death *independent of all reason*? Is her choice not rather the result of rational deliberation? Admittedly, strictly speaking, the moment of her death will be decided, that is, determined, by the "irrational being" but the decision to await natural death will be taken by the "rational being," and this decision cannot be said to be independent from all reason, for it involves rational deliberation.[25]

Section 185 of *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (the section that we are currently analysing) begins with four questions, whose purpose is to introduce Nietzsche's distinction between involuntary (natural) and voluntary (rational) death:

> What is more rational, to stop the machine when the work one demands of it has been completed—or to let it run on until it stops of its own accord, that is to say until it is ruined? Is the latter not a squandering of the cost of maintenance, a misuse of the energy and attentiveness of those who service it? Does it not mean throwing away that which is badly needed elsewhere? Will the fact that many of them are maintained and serviced to no productive end not even propagate a kind of contempt for machines in general? (WS, 185)

In a recent paper, Wienand *et al*. (2018: 161) argue that "Nietzsche does not clearly indicate his view on suicide in §185. The hermeneutic challenge of this text makes it impossible to work out a clear position for or against suicide." Although it is true that this section presents some obscurities (such as the derivation of the unnaturalness of voluntary death from its irrationality, mentioned earlier), it seems plausible to read Nietzsche's critique of involuntary (natural) death as irrational death within the broader context of his defence of suicide.

Wienand *et al*. (*id.*: 162) begin their analysis of this section by claiming that reading Nietzsche's early texts prospectively often biases one's understanding. Accordingly, reading section 185 (1880) with Zarathustra's speech *On Free Death* (1883) in mind may be misleading. By way of example, Wienand *et al*. (ibid.) refer to Sommer (2010: 171), who "starts his commentary of §185 by writing that, in many regards, *The Wanderer and His Shadow* anticipates the motto of the *Zarathustra*, 'die at the right time'." If on the one hand Wienand *et al*. are certainly right in pointing out that Nietzsche's texts should not be read prospectively, on the other hand the same texts should not be considered monolithically either. Indeed, if Nietzsche defends the rationality of (§80) and the right to (§88) suicide in the first volume of *Human, All Too Human* (1878) and preaches a free death in the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), is it not plausible to read section 185 of *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (1880) within this broader context and interpret it, as Sommer (ibid.) does, as a "committed plea for suicide"? It is precisely this context that allows the interpreter to

read the four questions quoted earlier as rhetorical questions, and to conclude that, far from unclear (as Wienand *et al*. (2018: 161) claim), Nietzsche's position is on the contrary unambiguous: voluntary death (suicide) is a more reasonable choice than natural death.[26]

As already pointed out elsewhere (Stellino 2015b: 90[27]), the implicit argument hidden behind the four initial questions of section 185 is an *argument from analogy*. Given the rhetorical character of these questions, the argument can be reconstructed as follows: just as it is more rational to stop the machine once the work we demand of it has been completed rather than to let it run until its complete deterioration, so it is more rational for an old man to rationally set a limit to his life once he has fulfilled his existential task and reached his goal rather than "to await his slow exhaustion and dissolution" (HH I, 80). This argument is problematic in several regards. First, Nietzsche does not define what he means by "rational" (*vernünftig*); nor does he give us any criteria according to which we could understand why the first option (to set a limit to life) would be more rational than the second one (to await for death). He instead appeals to a common-sense notion of rationality, which remains vague and indefinite.[28] He also does not give us any clues on why the rationality of death should have any weight in our preference for natural death or suicide. To be fair, it should be noted that Nietzsche illustrates the reasons for which he thinks that it is rational to stop an old machine: indeed, to let it run would imply a wasting of the cost of maintenance as well as a misuse of the work of those who service it—work which might be well employed elsewhere. In addition, the machine is "maintained and serviced to no productive end" (WS, 185). The problem here is, however, that the alleged rationality of the decision to stop the machine does not seem to imply the rationality of the old man's decision to take leave of life. From a Kantian point of view, for instance, Nietzsche's argument might be rejected by arguing that, unlike machines (which are things and can be used as mere means), human beings are rational persons and, as such, are ends in themselves. This is why we demolish old machines, while, on the contrary, we take care of old men, notwithstanding the related "cost of maintenance." However, to this objection one could reply that Nietzsche precisely rejected the Kantian moral viewpoint and called into question Kant's claim that human beings are ends in themselves.[29]

Actually, it is not necessary to refer to Kant's view of the human being to show that Nietzsche's argument might be considered problematic. Since this argument is an *argument from analogy*, the first step is to examine whether the analogy established by Nietzsche between an old machine and an old man is appropriate. The reason for this analogy is the task (or goal), which in both cases has been fulfilled and which makes irrational the machine's further working or the man's further existence. Nietzsche, however, seems to overlook an important aspect, which makes the two cases differ. In the former case, the task is *inherent*: the machine has been appositely created to fulfil the task *x* and once the machine is no longer able to fulfil this task, it seems rational to replace it with another one. In the latter case, however, unless we assume that man has been appositely created to fulfil a given task, we should recognize that the man's task is *contingent*. Now, unlike inherent tasks, contingent tasks can change in time: an old task can thus be replaced by a new one. Battin (1996: 133), for instance, mentions the case of Schumann who pursued a career as a virtuoso pianist until a hand injury put an end to his dream. After this tragic accident, Schumann transferred his musical interests on composing. By so doing, he replaced an old task with a new one. Nietzsche's argument seems in this sense based on a weak analogy.

In fairness to Nietzsche, two considerations can be nonetheless put forward. First, although according to Nietzsche's nihilistic worldview human existence has no inherent or pre-given meaning, the concept of *Aufgabe* (task) plays a pivotal role in his philosophy. The late Nietzsche specifically puts strong emphasis on his *historic* task, the revaluation of all values, of which he has a fatalistic and very self-conscious conception.[30] Given this emphasis, it is dubious that Nietzsche would have considered *his* task as being *replaceable*. Second, in WS 185 Nietzsche is not recommending taking the life of the "machine" that is no longer working properly. The decision to stop the machine must be taken by the owner, that

is, must be *voluntary*. In other words, suicide is a *personal* decision, and in this sense only the individual can ascertain whether he or she has or not completed his or her goal, whether the "machine" is still working in a satisfactory way or not. As long as one has a goal and is able to reach it (as in the case of Battin's example), suicide is not an option for Nietzsche. The question is rather why it should be more rational to let the "machine" run on until it stops of its own accord than to voluntarily stop the machine when the work one demands of it has been completed.

In WS 185, Nietzsche thus calls attention to a very important point, which should be particularly emphasized. In order to make our lives meaningful, we focus on tasks and goals. Most importantly, we do this to such an extent that, sometimes, the impossibility of fulfilling these tasks and goals seems to make our lives meaningless.[31] A novelist who has built his whole life on his writings may decide to kill himself if symptoms of serious dementia lead him to believe that he will soon no longer be able to write a word. As Battin (1996: 133) rightly points out, central interests and fundamental ground projects "cannot be simply dropped, replaced, or forgotten whenever circumstances arise that make their satisfaction impossible." If these interests and projects are really central and fundamental to one's life, it may not be rational to let them go. In this case, suicide might be considered a rational alternative. Note, however, that Nietzsche's claim is stronger than Battin's. As a matter of fact, Nietzsche thinks that suicide may be a rational option not only when the individual experiences the impossibility of fulfilling his task, but also when the individual has *already* fulfilled his task.[32] In this case, a timely death (a death at the *right time*) is to be preferred to a natural death.

4.2 Free Death and Quick Death

From the speech *On Free Death* (first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) onwards, the emphasis of Nietzsche's talk on suicide shifts from the dichotomy voluntary (rational) death/involuntary (natural) death to the juxtaposition free death/quick death. To be more precise, the former dichotomy reappears in Zarathustra's speech as consummating/grinning death, but the attention is now more on the contrast between free and quick death, as it will also be the case in *Twilight of the Idols*. On a general note, it is possible to say that in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche's defence of suicide is more personal and poetic. In a certain way, Nietzsche does not defend in his writings his position on suicide with proper arguments, but he rather tends to appeal to emotions. As a matter of fact, the texts in which Nietzsche presents his view of suicide have a strong rhetorical component (something typical of his philosophy), whose aim is to motivate the reader to adopt a different perspective on life and death. Nonetheless, Nietzsche also gives his readers reasons that support his argumentation, and these reasons can be scrutinized and examined just in the same way as Kant's or Schopenhauer's arguments can be. Unlike section 185 of *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, however, where Nietzsche's talk of suicide is reasoned and argued, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche employs a more metaphorical and allegorical language. Zarathustra presents the notion of free death by using the first-person perspective and addressing his disciples: in this way, the appeal to emotions is even stronger than in *The Wanderer and His Shadow*. Furthermore, whereas in *Human, All Too Human* (first volume) and in *The Wanderer and His Shadow* Nietzsche's emphasis is on the rationality of voluntary death and the irrationality of involuntary death, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* the attention is rather on timeliness and freedom. We have already considered the former aspect in the previous section. In what follows, the attention will be directed to the latter.

To begin with, it may be helpful to put in a note on terminology. The term "free death" (in German: "*freier Tod*") is a neologism coined by Nietzsche, which will later give origin to the word *Freitod*, first used by the Austrian philosopher Fritz Mauthner in 1906.[33] The term appears in published writings only in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in the homonymous speech *On Free Death*.[34] Indeed, despite its negative connotation, Nietzsche's preferred term for

suicide is *Selbstmord*. As in the case of Schopenhauer, this choice was most probably determined by the fact that *Selbstmord* was at the time the word commonly used to refer to the act of self-killing. Nietzsche's preference should thus be interpreted as the consequence of a linguistic habit.[35]

The fact that the term "free death" only appears in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* must not mislead about the importance of this notion for Nietzsche's view of suicide. Indeed, freedom is for Nietzsche one of the essential aspects (if not the most essential) that distinguish voluntary death from natural death, since the former, unlike the latter, is freely chosen. As the formula "free for death [*zum Tode*] and free in death" (Z I, *On Free Death*) indicates, the freedom to which Nietzsche alludes is not only a freedom *to die*—that is, a freedom to give ourselves a voluntary death and to freely choose *how* and *when*—but also a freedom *in dying*. In other words, this expression symbolizes Nietzsche's view of voluntary death as supreme affirmation of the individual's freedom and autonomy, a view which Nietzsche particularly shares with the Stoic tradition—although, as we will see, with a very important difference.

In reality, we have already seen that, strictly speaking, suicide can neither be an affirmation nor a negation of freedom, for death marks the exact moment in which the one who commits suicide ceases to exist.[36] Therefore, strictly speaking, one cannot be free *in* death. Still, suicide can be *metaphorically* said to be a *free* death in two important regards: as freedom *from* and as freedom *for*.[37] Seidler (1983: 436) emphasizes these two aspects in relation with the Stoic view of suicide:

> It is important to realize […] that suicide in Stoicism is not only a freedom *from* but also (even primarily) a freedom *for*. The man for whom suicide is a genuine option, in William James's terminology, is at liberty to be what he wants to be (or what he believes he ought to be), and this precisely because he is free from any sort of external compulsion or manipulation. He can always choose to die rather than to compromise the integrity of his character and the consistency of his principles.

For Nietzsche the freedom *from* that we gain by a voluntary death is multiple. First of all, it is a freedom from the dependence on our body—"the stunted, often sick and thick-witted prison warder" of *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (WS, 185). It is also a freedom from the human, all too human fear of death, which is "maybe older than pleasure and pain" (PF 25[399], spring 1884) and a "European disease" (PF 25[159], spring 1884).[38] Moreover and most importantly, suicide symbolizes liberation from Christian morality. Indeed, Nietzsche's aim is to remove the burden of moral judgement that Christian morality laid upon this act, turning it into a mortal sin and a horrible *contra naturam* offense. His effort is to present a demoralized view of suicide that—using a Nietzschean term—we may define as *emptied of morality* (*entmoralisiert*) or *moraline-free* (*moralinfrei*). Suicide is, in specific cases, a wholly natural and rational act, and if a moral judgement has to be laid upon it, this should rather be one of reverence and praise. In this sense, suicide does not pose for Nietzsche a moral dilemma. He does not enquire whether this action entails a violation of morality or a debasement of humanity, as Kant believed. He simply thinks of this action as something rational and natural, at least in certain situations.

In presenting a view of suicide emptied of morality, Nietzsche parts company with the Stoics. Indeed, although the Stoics (like Nietzsche) essentially consider suicide as a rational and legitimate choice under certain specific circumstances, at the same time, they also confer on suicide (unlike Nietzsche) a profound moral dimension. This is the reason for which the freedom achieved through suicide is for the Stoics mainly a *moral* freedom. As Seneca (1925, Vol. 1: 191–193) puts it,

> [h]e who has learned to die has unlearned slavery; he is above any external power, or, at any rate, he is beyond it. What terrors have prisons and bonds and bars for him? His way out is clear. There is only one chain which binds us to life, and that is the love

> of life. The chain may be not cast off, but it may be rubbed away, so that, when necessity shall demand, nothing may retard or hinder us from being ready to do at once that which at some time we are bound to do [*faciendum est*].

For the Stoics, suicide guarantees the possibility of preserving one's own moral integrity and autonomy, and it is for this reason that, as shown in the first chapter, Kant found "something moral" (LE, Collins 27/Kant 1997: 374) in their attitude towards it. For Nietzsche as well, suicide is strictly related to autonomy and freedom, but these are of a peculiar kind, namely autonomy and freedom *from moral and religious imperatives*.[39] In this sense, suicide is for Nietzsche also a freedom *for*: it represents and symbolizes a last affirmation of the individual's free and autonomous will. Or, to paraphrase Seidler, the individual can always choose to die rather than to bow his head to moral and religious imperatives.

Here we face what can *prima facie* be regarded as one of the most puzzling aspects of Nietzsche's view of suicide. Indeed, one of the characteristic features of Nietzsche's philosophy is his sceptical stance towards the existence of free will. Surely influenced by his reading of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche claims in the second volume of *Human, All Too Human* that "we *are* in prison, we can only *dream* ourselves free, not make ourselves free" (HH II, 33). Ten years later, in *Twilight of the Idols*, he still refutes free will as one of the four great errors of human reason: "We no longer have any sympathy nowadays for the concept 'free will': we know only too well what it is—the most disreputable piece of trickery the theologians have produced, aimed at making humanity 'responsible' in their sense, i.e. at *making it dependent on them*…" (TI, *Errors*, 7/Nietzsche 1998). Taking into consideration this firm rejection of free will, Nietzsche's characterization of suicide as a *free* death in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and as a death chosen *freely* in *Twilight of the Idols* may come as a surprise. In fact, how can death be free or chosen freely if human beings have no free will?

In reality, even though Nietzsche refutes the notion of free will, his aim is not to dismiss the concept of freedom, but rather to reformulate it.[40] Thus, when he conceives of suicide as a free death, Nietzsche seems to have in mind a notion of freedom that has nothing to do with the concept of free will dismissed as boorishly naïf and as pure mythology in section 21 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, but rather one that is more akin to the freedom of the *sovereign individual* from the *Genealogy of Morality*. Indeed, thanks to his independent, enduring, and unbreakable will, this individual has freed himself from morality of customs and is now "an autonomous, supra-ethical individual (because 'autonomous' and 'ethical' are mutually exclusive)" (GM, II, 2/Nietzsche 2006b). In other words, Nietzsche conceives of suicide as a *free* death not because suicide is an act of free will (at least, not in the traditional sense of the term) but rather because it is the expression of one's independence, individuality, and autonomy, that is to say, of one's freedom.[41]

Another aspect of Nietzsche's view of suicide that may be regarded, at least *prima facie*, as equally puzzling is the contrast between his critique of natural death and his well-known philosophical imperative *amor fati*, the keyword used by Nietzsche to express his new attitude towards fate: "to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them" (GS, 276). Indeed, it is important to note that this ideal does not merely imply a passive acceptance towards fate, but rather *love* of one's fate. In other words, *amor fati* is not merely a conforming of one's will to fate but a truly active disposition, an affirmation of both the sublime and tragic aspects of life.[42] Thus, how can Nietzsche possibly preach free death and, at the same time, invite us to love our fate and affirm life even in its most problematic aspects, including suffering, pain, and other kinds of adversity?

To show how this paradox is merely apparent, the following considerations may be brought forward. First, Nietzsche's fatalism does not entail passivity or immobility in the face of fate. This is precisely the error committed by Mohammedan fatalism (*Türkenfatalismus*), which Nietzsche criticizes in section 61 of *The Wanderer and His Shadow*. According to Nietzsche, Mohammedan fatalism sets man and fate over against one another, considering them as two separate things. In reality, when man thinks he is resisting

fate or resigning himself to it, he is precisely fulfilling it. Second, since every individual "is a piece of fate from top to bottom, one more law, one more necessity for all that is to come and will be" (TI, *Morality*, 6), any decision we may take is already included in our fate. In this sense, we have no possibility of going against fate, even by committing suicide. Third, far from being a refutation of one's own fate, suicide can be regarded as its full acceptance. For this act, as Nietzsche conceives it, implies the awareness as well as the acceptance that one's life cycle has ended. As Zarathustra puts it, "[f]ree for death and free in death, a sacred nay-sayer when it is no longer time for yes: thus he knows about death and life" (Z I, *On Free Death*). In this sense, Nietzsche condemns as cowardly the exaggerated attachment to life and the will to prolong its limit by way of every possible means.[43] Fourth and finally, in the same way that suicide is not a refutation but an acceptance of fate, so suicide is not a negation but an affirmation of life. For according to Nietzsche, it is precisely "for love of *life*" that one ought to choose a free and conscious death (TI, *Raids*, 36).

As we have seen so far, in presenting his view on suicide, Nietzsche proceeds by antitheses: voluntary death is rational, timely, conscious, joyful, natural, free, and autonomous, whereas involuntary death is irrational, untimely, unconscious, ghastly, "unnatural", unfree, and not autonomous. The novelty of Zarathustra's speech *On Free Death* lies in the fact that to the opposition voluntary/involuntary death Nietzsche adds the antithesis quick/slow death. For what concerns the first conceptual pair, Nietzsche introduces a new terminology: voluntary death is renamed "the consummating [*vollbringenden*] death," whereas involuntary death becomes the "grinning [*grinsender*] death."[44] By using the present participle of the verb *vollbringen* (to accomplish or achieve something), Nietzsche puts emphasis on the idea of death as an accomplishment or achievement of one's life. Death is here represented as a joyous festival, a last affirmation of one's love for life, where the dying person swears oaths to the living.[45] The voluntary character of this act is even more accentuated by the transitive use of the intransitive verb *sterben* (to die): "The consummated one dies [*stirbt*] *his* death" (Z I, *On Free Death*). The emphasis is clearly put on the control that the individual maintains over his life even in his last moments: he dies victoriously, unlike the one who awaits death, fearing it. In this latter case, death, with his derisive grin, "creeps up like a thief and yet comes as master" (ibid.).

Nietzsche's conception of death as an occasion of showing one's courage and strength is evident in his reformulation of the wisdom of Silenus.[46] As Zarathustra puts it, "[t]o die thus is best; second best, however, is to die fighting and to squander a great soul" (ibid.). To choose a free and autonomous death (the consummating death) is clearly the best option for Nietzsche. However, given that leaving at the right time is a difficult art, as Zarathustra himself recognizes, the second best option is to die showing none of that cowardice which characterizes those who cling to life and refuse to take leave when they should. To make more vivid the contrast between a timely and an untimely death, Nietzsche makes use of the metaphor of the apple. The best moment to eat an apple is when it tastes best. On the contrary, when apples keep clinging to the branch, they become yellow, wrinkled, and rotten: in one word, worm-food.

The metaphor of the apple allows Nietzsche to introduce the second antithesis of the speech, the antithesis between quick and slow death:

> Far too many live and far too long they hang on their branches. Would that a storm came to shake all this rot and worm-food from the tree!
>
> Would that preachers of the *quick* death came! They would be the right storms and shakers of the trees of life for me! But I hear only preaching of the slow death and patience with all things "earthly." (ibid.)

Zarathustra's invocation of preachers of the quick death mirrors the beginning of a previous speech belonging to the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, whose title is precisely *On the Preachers of Death*. In this speech, Zarathustra says: "There are preachers of death, and the earth is full of people to whom departure from life must be preached. The earth is full of

the superfluous, life is spoiled by the all too many. May they be lured from this life with the 'eternal life!'" (Z I, *Preachers*). In both speeches, Zarathustra defends the idea that death should be preached to many people who seem to constitute a burden for humanity and its flourishing. What differs is, however, the reason for which death should be preached to them. Whereas in *On Free Death* quick death is destined for those who cling to life out of cowardice and fear and refuse to take a timely leave from it, in *On the Preachers of Death* the target of Nietzsche's critique is constituted by all those pessimists (the preachers of death) who in one way or another are weary of life, conveying a pessimistic picture of it.[47] In other words, Nietzsche's main concern in *On the Preachers of Death* is not death, nor dying, but rather life—or to be more precise, its devaluation by the hands of pessimists who teach that "life is only suffering" and that giving birth makes no sense, since "one bears only the unhappy" (ibid.).

An important aspect of *On the Preachers of Death* must be emphasized: Nietzsche does not reject pessimism only on the grounds of its devaluation of life, but also for two further reasons. The first reason, which is philosophical in nature, is a typical argument put forward against pessimism: according to Nietzsche, pessimists tend to focus their attention on the tragic aspects of existence, minimizing or even ignoring the joyous ones. Their refusal of life is thus based on a prejudicial view of existence. Being biased, this refusal must be, in turn, refuted. As Nietzsche puts it, "[t]hey encounter a sick or a very old person or corpse, and right away they say 'life is refuted!' But only they are refuted and their eyes, which see only the one face of existence" (ibid.).[48] The second reason for Nietzsche's rejection of pessimism can be defined as "pragmatic": Nietzsche reproaches pessimists who, instead of teaching a quick death to those who suffer, bind them all the more to life "with their chains and gifts" (ibid.). As a consequence, the earth is full of miserable and suffering people (the *superfluous ones*, in Nietzsche's vocabulary). Preachers of death should be thus consistent with their preaching and preach death to the (spiritually) sick people. They should also pass away themselves. As Nietzsche ironically puts it, "'[l]ife is only suffering', so speak others, and do not lie; then see to it that *you* cease. Then see to it that the life that is only suffering ceases! And let the doctrine of your virtue speak thus: 'Thou shalt kill thyself! Thou shalt steal thyself away!'" (ibid.).

The aforementioned section 36 of *Reconnaissance Raids of an Untimely Man* from *Twilight of the Idols* puts together the two aspects (quick death and pessimism) that in the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* were still separated. Here we face the most delicate and troubling part of Nietzsche's view of suicide. Indeed, whereas in the speech *On Free Death* the focus is primarily on free death and the tone of Nietzsche's critique of the superfluous ones is often ironic, in section 36 Nietzsche's primary concern is the sick (as clearly indicated by the title) and the tone has become undoubtedly harsher. Furthermore, whereas in *On Free Death* Zarathustra is *advising* (German: *rathen*) the superfluous ones to take leave of life and not to cling to it, in section 36 this advice is only directed to pessimists. The sick are now ignored as interlocutors and Nietzsche addresses directly to physicians, urging them to think and act differently with regard to them. Thus, the late Nietzsche becomes the spokesman of a new, fearsome philanthropy ("The weak and the failures should perish: first principle of *our* love of humanity"—he writes in *The Anti-Christ* (A, 2)—"[a]nd they should be helped to do this") and of a ruthless *Morality for Physicians* (this is the title of section 36):

> A sick person is a parasite on society. Once one has reached a certain state it is indecent to live any longer. Vegetating on in cowardly dependence on physicians and their methods, once the meaning of life, the *right* to life has been lost, should be greeted with society's profound contempt. The physicians, for their part, ought to convey this contempt—not prescriptions, but every day a new dose of *disgust* at their patient… Create a new kind of responsibility, the physicians', to apply in all cases where the highest interest of life, of *ascending* life, demands that *degenerating* life be ruthlessly pushed down and aside—for example in the case of the right to procreate,

> the right to be born, the right to live… Die proudly if it is no longer possible to live proudly. (TI, *Raids*, 36)

It would be tempting to interpret Nietzsche's words as metaphorical.[49] However, the late *Nachlass* seems to leave little doubt that these words have to be taken at face value.[50] Even so, it is necessary to proceed with caution and to point out a few caveats. First, although on a first reading of this passage it might seem that Nietzsche is advocating euthanasia for the sick persons, in reality Nietzsche is not saying that physicians should euthanize their patients, but rather that they should "encourage" them to take leave of life once they have reached a certain state. Indeed, as the late *Nachlass* shows, Nietzsche was more interested in (negative) eugenics rather than in euthanasia.[51]

Second, although there is no denying that, considered from a contemporary perspective, Nietzsche's view appears ruthless and merciless (so much so that Nietzsche scholars often tend to simply ignore these passages or to dismiss them as metaphorical and isolated thoughts), his words need to be understood within the more general context of his philosophy. For instance, the distinction between *ascending* (*aufsteigendes*) and *descending* (*niedergehendes*) life that Nietzsche draws in the passage quoted earlier is typical of his late philosophy. This distinction can be understood and fully appreciated only within the broader context of Nietzsche's diagnosis of contemporary *décadence* as well as of his critique of Christian morality. The posthumous fragment 11[50], November 1887–March 1888, clearly shows that Nietzsche associates the descending life to the old (Christian) values and ideals, which are inimical to life and "born from *décadence* and determining it," and the ascending life to the new values. More generally, one of the main worries of the late Nietzsche is the overall "degeneration and diminution of humanity into the perfect herd animal" (BGE, 203). Nietzsche deeply felt the need to halt the decadence of modern man and pleaded in his writings for a revaluation of strong and healthy instincts. According to Nietzsche, this decadence was partly caused by the equal value that Christian morality had given to healthy and sick individuals.[52] It was therefore necessary to counter this decline with biopolitical practices, which in Nietzsche's view should range from eugenics to the fostering of a new mentality regarding the lives of sick people.

Passages like the one quoted earlier should also be read in the wider context of the scientific and cultural debate of Nietzsche's time. As Moore (2002), Holub (2007), and Salanskis (2013) have shown, similar ideas were entertained by many physicians, biologists, psychiatrists, and philosophers at that time.[53] As Holub (2007: 185) clearly puts it, "Nietzsche's were timely remarks." For what concerns more specifically eugenics, it should not be forgotten that, although this term is usually associated with Germany's Nazi regime, eugenic ideas can be found already in Plato. Schopenhauer himself refers to the fifth book of the *Republic* in a passage from the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, where he defends the view that "a real and fundamental improvement of the human race may be possible, but not so much from without as from within, and thus not through teaching and education but through the generations" (WWR II: 543–544/Schopenhauer 2018).[54] Furthermore, eugenic measures were adopted in various Western democracies in the early decades of the twentieth century (Indiana was the first American state to legalize a law authorizing compulsory sterilization in 1907), that is, well before 1933, when Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany.[55] Finally, we should keep in mind that "the majority of serious, respected eugenicists […] were not, contrary to popular belief, interested in creating a superhuman species. […] [T]hey were, like Nietzsche, more interested in 'negative', rather than 'positive', eugenics; or what, in Germany, became known as 'racial hygiene'" (Moore 2002: 136). This is not to exempt Nietzsche from his responsibility,[56] but rather to warn against the temptation of reading his words through the distorting prism of our historical perspective and taking them to justify Nazi-like eugenics and euthanasia. Nietzsche's writings must be set in their historical and cultural context: considering, for example, Nietzsche's strong aversion to anti-semitism, nationalism, and militarism, there is

no reason to assume that he would have approved of something like the infamous *Aktion T4*, and there is every reason to believe (considering, for example, his critique of modernity as a "*herd-animalization*" of man; TI, *Raids*, 38) that he would have been appalled by the whole phenomenon of twentieth-century totalitarianism.

Section 36 of *Reconnaissance Raids of an Untimely Man* ends with an ironic word of advice for "pessimist gentlemen and other *décadents*" (TI, *Raids*, 36). Here, Nietzsche takes up some considerations already developed in *Zarathustra*'s speech *On the Preachers of Death*. Referring to the wisdom of Silenus, Nietzsche writes that "we have no power to prevent our being born: but we can make up for this mistake" (ibid.).[57] In this case the most admirable thing a pessimist can do is to do away with him or her: in Nietzsche's opinion, this almost earns him or her the right to live. Nietzsche's idea is basically that pessimists should take the logic of their pessimism a step further, that is, to commit suicide and "not simply deny life with 'will and representation', as Schopenhauer did—one must *deny Schopenhauer first of all*" (ibid.).

4.3 Meaninglessness and Suicide

In his first work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche uses Heraclitus' famous metaphor of the *aeon* (life or, according to Nietzsche's translation, "the force that shapes the world [*die weltbildende Kraft*]") as a *pais paizon* (fr. B 52), that is, "a playing child who sets down stones here, there, and the next place, and who builds up piles of sand only to knock them down again" (BT, 24), to symbolize the essential meaninglessness and valuelessness of existence. This is a characteristic feature of Nietzsche's worldview throughout his philosophical career, as the famous posthumous note 5[71] dedicated to European nihilism and written in Lenzer Heide on 10 June 1887 exemplarily shows. In this note, Nietzsche describes the advantages of the Christian moral hypothesis as follows: (1) it endowed man with an absolute value; (2) it conceded the world, despite suffering and evil, the character of perfection; and (3) it gave man knowledge of absolute values. Morality was, in sum, "the great *antidote* to practical and theoretical *nihilism*" (PF 5[71], summer 1886–autumn 1887). According to Nietzsche, as a consequence of the death of God caused by the same concept of truthfulness cultivated by Christian morality,[58] this worldview is now recognized for what it is, a "long-ingrained mendacity" (ibid.). As Nietzsche puts it, "belief in the absolute immorality of nature, in the absence of purpose and meaning, becomes the psychological necessary *affect* once belief in God and an essentially moral order can no longer be sustained" (ibid.).

Given this nihilist picture of the world, the question of whether life is or is not worth living acquires fundamental importance. For if existence is absurd and full of suffering, what is the reason to consider life worth living? Is not death preferable to life?[59] In what follows, attention will be focused on the answer Nietzsche gave, in the different periods of his life, to these proto-existentialist questions. As in the case of Nietzsche's view of voluntary and involuntary death considered in the two previous sections of this chapter, Nietzsche's consideration of the relation between meaninglessness and suicide is also unmethodical. Sometimes he raises the question directly—as, for instance, in section 34 of *Human, All Too Human*. At other times he is concerned with topics (such as the eternal recurrence, nihilism, or the Dionysian affirmation of life) that are either directly or indirectly related to the question. Even in this second case it is possible to piece together Nietzsche's considerations into a unitary picture and derive from it an answer to the question of whether, according to him, suicide may or may not be a possible solution to a meaningless existence.

Before we consider Nietzsche's answer, however, a caveat is needed: the following section does not attempt to provide an exhaustive analysis of the way in which Nietzsche considered the relation between meaninglessness and suicide throughout his philosophical career. For this is a topic which has several related aspects of primary importance in Nietzsche's philosophy (such as art, the death of God, the eternal recurrence, nihilism, and

Nietzsche's critique of truth, among others), the exploration of which would require a separate study.[60] The aim of this section is rather to show that throughout his philosophical life Nietzsche was concerned either directly or indirectly with the question of whether life is or is not worth living, and that this is a question of fundamental importance in the context of his philosophy.[61]

As already mentioned, Schopenhauer's worldview constitutes the background of Nietzsche's artists' metaphysics in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Like Schopenhauer, the young Nietzsche also conceived of human existence as meaningless and absurd, full of pointless suffering and pain. So what, if anything, made life worth living? Nietzsche answers this question by reference to the solution the ancient Greeks had provided to the same dilemma, a solution which aimed to counteract the pessimistic view expressed in the wisdom of Silenus:

> An ancient legend recounts how King Midas hunted long in the forest for the wise *Silenus*, companion of Dionysus, but failed to catch him. When Silenus has finally fallen into his hands, the King asks what is the best and most excellent thing for human beings. Stiff and unmoving, the daemon remains silent until, forced by the King to speak, he finally breaks out in shrill laughter and says: 'Wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and tribulation, why do you force me to tell you the very thing which it would be most profitable for you *not* to hear? The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon.' (BT, 3/Nietzsche 1999a)

As Nietzsche maintains, the ancient Greeks reversed Silenus' wisdom through art, specifically through an instinct of transfiguration that gave birth to the creation of the Olympian gods and, ultimately, of tragedy as form of art. The Olympian gods, who stood at the pinnacle of Apolline culture, were produced by the need to endure the terror and horror of existence. Nietzsche repeatedly emphasizes how this was a *vital* need for the Greeks: it was out of "the most profound compulsion [*aus tiefster Nöthigung*]," "in order to be able to live," that they had (*mussten*) to create these gods (ibid.). Indeed, Nietzsche asks, "how else could that people have borne existence, given their extreme sensitivity, their stormy desires, their unique gift for *suffering*, if that same existence had not been shown to them in their gods, suffused with a higher glory?" (ibid.). The ancient Greeks made use of the Olympian world as a transfiguring mirror: they saw themselves in the higher sphere of beauty and glory of the Olympians. Existence had therefore become desirable through a theodicy, "the only satisfactory theodicy!" (ibid.): the gods themselves lived the life of men, and thus justified it. The will now longed vehemently for existence, for this appeared transfigured in the exuberant and triumphant life of the Olympian gods, where "everything that exists has been deified, regardless of whether it is good or evil" (ibid.).

According to Nietzsche, Silenus' wisdom was also counteracted by Greek tragedy, more precisely, by its effect. In the characterization of this effect, Nietzsche clearly departs from Schopenhauer. Indeed, for Schopenhauer, the goal of tragedy was to portray the terrible aspects of life ("the unspeakable pain, the misery of humanity, the triumph of wickedness, the scornful domination of chance, and the hopeless fall of the righteous and the innocent"; WWR I: 280), thereby allowing the spectator to reach "a significant intimation as to the nature of the world and of existence" (ibid.). This insight into the true essence of the world was supposed to lead to resignation and to the abandonment of the will to life. For Nietzsche as well tragedy allowed the spectator to cast a glance into the true essence of things (according to Nietzsche, in the ecstasy of the Dionysiac state the barriers and limits of existence were destroyed). Nevertheless, if for Schopenhauer tragedy acted as a *tranquillizer* of the will, for Nietzsche tragedy provided "the metaphysical solace […] that in the ground of things, and despite all changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable" (BT, 7). According to Nietzsche's reading, the Greeks had "gazed with keen eye into the midst of the fearful, destructive havoc of so-called world history, and ha[d] seen

the cruelty of nature," thus being "in danger of longing to deny the will as the Buddhist does" (ibid.). What saved the Greeks from this danger was art, for art was able to "re-direct those repulsive thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which man can live" (ibid.).[62]

Thus, whereas for Schopenhauer the only way to suppress the will to life is cognition which, as shown in the previous chapter, should lead to the negation of the will, for Nietzsche "knowledge kills action; action requires one to be shrouded in a veil of illusion" (ibid.). Art precisely provides man with these veils. In this regard, its function is not merely to offer a temporary respite from suffering or to be a palliative, as Schopenhauer thought, but to save and heal.[63] Here, Nietzsche's early philosophy clearly parts company from Schopenhauer. Indeed, despite the absurdity and meaninglessness of existence, the early Nietzsche does not deny life, as his teacher does. He rather considers it "possible and worth living" thanks to the essential role played by art (BT, 1).[64] By so doing, he gives an affirmative answer to the question of whether life is or is not worth living, refusing the possibility of taking into consideration suicide as a "remedy" for a meaningless existence—albeit for different reasons than those given by Schopenhauer.

Nietzsche's view of existence as meaningless does not change in the so-called middle period (the period that goes from the publication of the first volume of *Human, All Too Human* in 1878 to the publication of the first edition of *The Gay Science* in 1882). In this period Nietzsche clearly puts forward a projectivist stance about moral and aesthetic valuations, according to which the world is in itself devoid of value (*werthlos*) and meaning (*sinnlos*). If the world appears to us as having value and meaning it is only because we previously projected these attributes onto it.[65] As Nietzsche puts it, respectively, in *Human, All Too Human* and in *The Gay Science*,

> [b]ecause we have for millennia made moral, aesthetic, religious demands on the world, looked upon it with blind desire, passion or fear, and abandoned ourselves to the bad habits of illogical thinking, this world has gradually *become* so marvellously variegated, frightful, meaningful, soulful, it has acquired colour—but we have been the colourists[66]: it is the human intellect that has made appearance appear and transported its erroneous basic conceptions into things. (HH I, 16)

> It is we, the thinking-sensing ones, who really and continually *make* something that is not yet there: the whole perpetually growing world of valuations, colours, weights, perspectives, scales, affirmations, and negations. […] Whatever has *value* in the present world has it not in itself, according to its nature—nature is always value-less—but has rather been given, granted value, and *we* were the givers and granters! Only we have created the world *that concerns human beings*! (GS, 301)[67]

In the last two sections of the first chapter of *Human, All Too Human* (HH I, 33 and 34), Nietzsche directly considers the question of how and why to go on living in a world devoid of meaning. In section 33 titled *Error Regarding Life Necessary to Life*, Nietzsche claims that every belief in the value and dignity of life rests on illusion and false thinking. Human beings believe in the value of existence only because they do not empathize "with the universal life and suffering of mankind" (HH I, 33), that is, they exist for themselves alone. Those who can participate in other beings' misfortunes and suffering would despair of this value—for "mankind has as a whole *no* goal, and the individual man when he regards its total course cannot derive from it any support or comfort, but must be reduced to despair. If in all he does he has before him the ultimate goallessness of man, his actions acquire in his own eyes the character of useless squandering" (ibid.). But who could feel thus squandered and bear the awareness that life is aimless? In Nietzsche's view, only a poet can do so, for poets "always know how to console themselves" (ibid.).[68]

In the following section (HH I, 34), Nietzsche asks whether his philosophy thus becomes a tragedy and truth inimical to life.[69] He then poses two more questions, which reveal that he was genuinely aware of the possible nihilistic consequences of a worldview like his: "whether one *could* consciously reside in untruth? or, if one were *obliged* to, whether death would not be preferable?" (ibid.). Here Nietzsche directly considers the possibility of suicide as an escape from a valueless, aimless existence and, therefore, as an alternative to a life consciously lived in untruth. This possibility becomes even more concrete if we consider that Nietzsche judged to have annihilated morality and religion. "There is no longer any 'ought'," he writes, meaning that there is no longer a moral obligation on man to preserve life at any cost (ibid.). "The whole of human life is sunk deeply in untruth," Nietzsche continues, "the individual cannot draw it up out of this well without thereby growing profoundly disillusioned about his own past, without finding his present motives, such as that of honour, absurd [*ungereimt*], and pouring mockery and contempt on the passions which reach out to the future and promise happiness in it" (ibid.). Is all that remains despair and, on a theoretical level, a "philosophy of destruction" (ibid.), that is to say, a practical nihilism?

Nietzsche's answer to this question will basically remain unchanged over the years: "the nature of the after-effect of knowledge is determined by a man's *temperament*" (ibid.). In other words, it is simply a question of *spiritual strength*.[70] Despair and resignation in the face of the meaninglessness of existence are but one possibility: certainly, they are not Nietzsche's proposed solution. On the contrary, one could easily conceive of a completely different after-effect "by virtue of which a life could arise much simpler and emotionally cleaner than our present life is" (ibid.). In this case, rather than being the cause of despair, knowledge would exert a purifying influence (the old motives produced by inherited habit would gradually grow weaker and one would live "among men and with oneself as in *nature*") and be a stimulant of life (one would continue to live "only so as to know better") (ibid.). For this to happen, however, one would have to possess the requisite temperament: "a firm, mild and at bottom cheerful soul" (ibid.).

The emphasis that Nietzsche places on one's spiritual strength highlights an important difference between the period of *The Birth of Tragedy* and that of *Human, All Too Human*. In the later work, Nietzsche rejects his earlier artists' metaphysics and the theme of suicide inevitably acquires a *personal dimension*: whether or not we want to go on living—whether we *can* or *cannot* go on living—depends exclusively on our spiritual strength, that is, on our ability to endure a meaningless life without the help of any metaphysical comfort.[71] The same logic is taken to extremes in the thought of the eternal recurrence. In the same way as in *Human, All Too Human* knowledge is presented in a disjunctive form and can lead either to despair or to the acceptance of the tragic character of life, in *The Gay Science* (§341) the thought of the eternal recurrence can provoke two opposing reactions: on the one hand, the idea that life will return unchanged innumerable times, with every pain and every joy, can be perceived as the heaviest weight (the thick black snake, which in *Zarathustra*'s speech *On the Vision and the Riddle* hangs from the mouth of the young shepherd and is about to choke him); on the other hand, eternal recurrence can be considered as the most divine and sublime thought, in which the extreme form of yes-saying to life and the unconditional love for one's fate are expressed. The effect of this thought is therefore determined by one's spiritual strength, in exactly the same way in which one's temperament—to use the expression from *Human, All Too Human*—is the decisive factor in one's reaction to the announcement of the death of God: indeed, this event can lead one to experience either disorientation, anguish, and fear (life has no longer meaning and purpose; GS, 125) or joy, relief, and enthusiasm (the horizon seems clear again and the ships of the lovers of knowledge may "set out to face any danger"; GS, 343).[72]

Interestingly, scholars have related the thought of eternal recurrence to the myth of Sisyphus.[73] Just as the gods condemned Sisyphus for all eternity to push a rock up to the top of a mountain only to see it roll down again, similarly, Nietzsche would "condemn" man to

live a meaningless existence that returns innumerable times and always unchanged. In the Lenzer Heide note mentioned earlier, the thought of the eternal recurrence is indeed defined as "the most extreme form of nihilism": "existence as it is, without meaning or goal, but inevitably recurring, without any finale into nothingness" (PF 5[71], summer 1886–autumn 1887).[74] The thought of an eternally recurring existence, in which any metaphysical meaning and teleology is rejected, is paralyzing; all the more so if suicide provides no way out: "everything becomes and recurs eternally—*escape* [*entschlüpfen*] is *impossible*!" (PF 24[7], winter 1883–1884). But this is precisely the *selective function* that Nietzsche assigns to this thought: it strengthens the spiritually strong ones and paralyzes the weak, decadent, and world-weary.

Within this picture, the revaluation of all values plays an essential role as a means (among others) to endure the thought of the eternal recurrence. As Nietzsche puts it in a note from 1884,

> [m]eans of *enduring* it [the thought of the eternal recurrence]: the revaluation of all values. No longer joy in certainty but in uncertainty; no longer "cause and effect" but the continually creative; no longer will to preservation but to power; no longer the humble expression, "everything is *merely* subjective," but "it is also our work!"—Let us be proud of it! (PF 26[284], summer-autumn 1884)

As this note clearly shows, Nietzsche considers that nihilism can be faced only through a change of perspective regarding the precariousness of human life. Given that uncertainty and meaninglessness are the most peculiar characteristics of existence, creation of value and meaning becomes a way to endure the eternally returning vacuity of existence. It is precisely for this reason that Nietzsche puts so much emphasis on the revaluation of all values—for in order to subsist, man needs to create and give a new meaning to an inherently meaningless world.

It is at this point, I believe, that the analogy between the myth of Sisyphus and the doctrine of the eternal recurrence falls down. For even if we concede that Sisyphus may scorn and transcend his fate at the time when he becomes conscious of it, and that "the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart" (Camus 1975: 111), still there is no place for this creative dimension in Sisyphus' existence. Admittedly, we can imagine Sisyphus giving a personal meaning to his meaningless task, but as Loeb (2008: 188) points out,

> [t]he task performed by Sisyphus is imposed on him by the gods and is not in any way his or created by him. Nor, despite the providential reasoning Camus attributes to Sisyphus, is this task in any way meaningful. The gods deliberately select an arbitrary stone, an arbitrary mountain, and the completely meaningless task of pushing the stone up the mountain. That the stone always rolls back down after it has been pushed up shows that there is nothing meaningful or successful in Sisyphus reaching the mountain top, or in pushing the stone up there, or even less in achieving a moment of lucidity there.[75]

Thanks to the emphasis put on the creative dimension of the revaluation, Nietzsche's philosophy is able to break out of the following, reductive dichotomy: either God exists—and therefore human existence is meaningful—or God does not exist—and therefore life has no meaning and nothing really matters. A brief analogy with Nietzsche's late epistemological stance may help to elucidate this point. In *The Twilight of the Idols*' famous section "How the 'Real World' Finally Became a Fable," Nietzsche summarizes in six points the main stages of the history of an error, which prejudiced the development of philosophy from Plato to positivism: the positing of a real (true, metaphysical) world conceived in opposition to an apparent (false, physical) world. According to Nietzsche, the error consisted not only in positing the existence of a metaphysical world but also in valuing it at the expense of the

physical world. This error is overcome when the “real world” is finally recognized as a useless, superfluous idea, and, therefore, it is possible to do away with it. According to Nietzsche, however, together with the “real world” it is necessary to do away with the “apparent one” as well. For any reference to an “apparent world” loses its meaning once the traditional, metaphysical dichotomy real/apparent or true/false world has been refuted.

The same logic can be transposed from the epistemological to the existentialist level. One of the consequences of the death of God is the acknowledgement that human existence has no transcendent meaning or purpose. Within this context, the philosophical-existentialist question of whether a life in a world devoid of any intrinsic meaning and purpose is worth living at all can be considered as a remnant of the old, metaphysical way of thinking, which holds that if the world has no meaning in itself it cannot have any meaning at all, and therefore: *why not suicide?* Nietzsche’s late philosophy precisely seeks to overcome this dichotomous logic: a new *human* and *earthly* meaning can be created through revaluation. Existence becomes meaningful once again—but this time *immanently* meaningful—and as a result the question of suicide ceases to be so distressing.[76]

The revaluation thus becomes the key to overcome the nihilistic attitudes towards life and the resulting longing for suicide. Man cannot live in a world devoid of meaning and value. In order to fill the void of a meaningless and absurd existence, he therefore needs to give life a new meaning and to create new values or revaluate the old ones. This is a fundamental, *vital* need of the human being, as the following passage from *Zarathustra* shows: “Humans first placed values into things, in order to preserve themselves—they first created meaning for things, a human meaning! […] Only through esteeming is there value, and without esteeming the nut of existence would be hollow” (Z I, *Goals*). By giving a value and a meaning to the world, human beings satisfied this vital need. However, according to the interpretation that Nietzsche puts forward in the third treatise of the *Genealogy of Morality*, the only meaning that man was able to create so far was an ascetic, nihilistic meaning. As Nietzsche himself puts it, “[e]xcept for the ascetic ideal, man, the *animal* man, had no meaning up to now. His existence on earth had no purpose” (GM, III, 28).[77]

According to Nietzsche, man suffered from the lack of meaning and purpose of his life, being initially unable to fill this void. The problem, however, was not so much that he suffered, but rather that his suffering had no meaning. The pivotal role played by the ascetic ideal in human history is precisely that it offered man a meaning for his suffering: man was guilty, and suffered for his guilt.[78] In this way, a physiological condition was falsely interpreted from a moral-religious perspective. However, the goal was achieved: “the enormous emptiness seemed filled; the door was shut on all suicidal [*selbstmörderischen*] nihilism” (ibid.). Unfortunately, this interpretation was hostile to life and brought a deeper and more poisonous suffering:

> It is absolutely impossible for us to conceal what was actually expressed by that whole willing that derives its direction from the ascetic ideal: this hatred of the human, and even more of the animalistic, even more of the material, this horror of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty, this longing to get away from appearance, transience, growth, death, wishing, longing itself—all that means, let us dare to grasp it, a *will to nothingness*, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental prerequisites of life, but it is and remains a *will*! (ibid.)

The ascetic ideal provided man with a solution to the riddle of his existence. He was no longer like “a leaf in the breeze, the plaything of the absurd, of ‘non-sense’” (ibid.). But at what price? Paradoxically, the preservation of life was obtained through disgust with it: the will was saved, but now man longed for nothingness. Man had only been able to create nihilistic and life-devaluing values in order to give life a meaning. Only within this perspective it is possible to understand the great importance that the late Nietzsche attributes to the revaluation, which aims towards a new, healthy, and life-affirming valuation of life.

In this context, art plays a key role. Already in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche had realized that science alone was not able to meet a basic condition of human existence: "man *must* from time to time believe he knows *why* he exists; his race cannot thrive without a periodic trust in life—without faith in the *reason in life*!" (GS, 1). Art precisely meets this need by falsifying reality (albeit with good will) and making existence bearable to us:

> *Our ultimate gratitude to art.*—Had we not approved of the arts and invented this type of cult of the untrue, the insight into general untruth and mendacity that is now given to us by science—the insight into delusion and error as a condition of cognitive and sensate existence—would be utterly unbearable. *Honesty* would lead to nausea and suicide. But now our honesty has a counterforce that helps us avoid such consequences: art, as the *good* will to appearance. […] As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still *bearable* to us, and art furnishes us with the eye and hand and above all the good conscience to be *able* to make such a phenomenon of ourselves. (GS, 107)[79]

It is, however, in the late period that art (not every kind of art—Christian and Romantic art are rather expressions of decadence in Nietzsche's view) plays a pivotal role in Nietzsche's philosophy, namely as *countermovement of nihilism*.[80] Having analysed the meaning of the ascetic ideal in its multiple manifestations (the artist, the philosopher, and the priest), in the last part of the third treatise of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche searches for *opponents* (an opposing will or ideal) of this ideal. In this context, science and art are again juxtaposed. Nietzsche rejects the idea that science might represent the enemy of the ascetic ideal. In his view, science is rather its "*most recent and noble manifestation*" (GM, III, 23), for it is animated by the faith in a metaphysical and absolute value of truth.[81] Conversely, art, "in which *lying* sanctifies itself and the *will to deception* has good conscience on its side," is opposed to a much greater extent to the ascetic ideal than science is, as Plato, "the greatest enemy of art Europe has yet produced," instinctively sensed (GM, III, 25).

It should therefore not be surprising that the late Nietzsche, who conceived of art "as the only superior counterforce to all will to denial of life, as that which is anti-Christian, anti-Buddhist, anti-nihilist *par excellence*" (PF 14[17], spring 1888), saw in art a countermovement of nihilism and a much stronger opposition to the ascetic ideal than in science. As a great life-affirming force, art produces "perfection and plenitude" and is "essentially *affirmation, blessing, deification of existence*" (PF 14[47], spring 1888).[82] Since "truth is ugly" (PF 16[40], spring–summer 1888), we need art to transfigure the world and make existence bearable. As Nietzsche clearly puts it, "we possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*" (ibid.). Thanks to its affirming and transfiguring function, art acts against every kind of suicidal nihilism.[83] This does not mean that the late Nietzsche defends a naïf view according to which, in order to bear the meaninglessness and purposelessness of existence, it would be sufficient to adopt a self-deceiving attitude based on pious lies. After all, honesty (*Redlichkeit*) is the virtue *par excellence* of free spirits, a virtue which they cannot get rid of (BGE, 227/Nietzsche 2002). Spiritual strength thus remains an essential quality to withstand the ugliness of "truth." Still, art retains a privileged status for the two reasons mentioned earlier: (1) unlike metaphysics, morality, religion, and science (which are all products of man's "will to art, to lie, to flight from 'truth', to *negation* of 'truth'"; PF 11[415], November 1887–March 1888), art openly sanctifies the lie and, therefore, is alone in having a good conscience; (2) like metaphysics, morality, religion, and science, art helps man to bear his life, but, unlike them, it does not devaluate it, but rather acts as a stimulant: "Art and nothing but art! It is the great means of making life possible, the great seduction to life, the great stimulant of life" [84] (ibid.).

In a sort of retrospective look at his life, Nietzsche explains in the *Epilogue* to *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (on which he worked some weeks before his mental collapse during the first week of January, 1889[85]) that, having descended into the depths of the "abyss of *severe*

suspicion" (NW, *Epilogue*, 2), he has lost his trust in life, yet not his love of life. If art is still needed to convalescents like him, this is certainly not the "whole romantic uproar and tumult of the senses that is loved by educated mob," but rather "*another kind* of art—a mocking, light, fleeting, divinely untroubled, divinely artificial art that, like a bright flame, blazes into an unclouded sky! Above all: an art for artists, *only for artists!*" (ibid.). This is because the philosopher who has descended into the abyss of severe suspicion and has thus discovered the ugliness of truth has become like an artist who has learnt "to forget well, to be good at *not* knowing!" (ibid.). As Nietzsche puts it, "[n]o, we have grown sick of this bad taste, this will to truth, to 'truth at any price', this youthful madness in the love of truth: we are too experienced, too serious, too jovial, too burned, too *deep* for that" (ibid.). Once again, Nietzsche's point is not that man should live a lotus-eaters-like existence, but rather that, since truth is ugly, man has need of the veils of art in order to transfigure life. In this, he should follow the model of the Ancient Greeks:

> Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to *live*: what is needed for that is to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin; to worship appearance, to believe in shapes, tones, words, in the whole *Olympus of appearance*! Those Greeks were superficial—*out of profundity*. … And isn't this precisely what we are coming back to, we daredevils of the spirit who have climbed the highest and most dangerous peak of current thought and looked around from up there, looked *down* from up there? Are we not just in this respect—Greeks? Worshippers of shapes, tones, words? And therefore—*artists*?… (ibid.)

4.4 Concluding Remarks

Nietzsche's worldview was strongly characterized by the absolute meaninglessness and purposelessness of human existence. This conception clearly influenced his view of suicide: since life has no inherent value and there is no God to whom we owe our life, we are not bound in principle to await natural death to come. In contrast to Kant and Schopenhauer, for Nietzsche there are no philosophical and, above all, moral valid reasons to refute suicide. What counts is rather the rationality of an act that enables man to avoid useless suffering and a debasing death; an act whose natural character and correct, physiological appreciation we have to restore against the religious, particularly Christian, distorting view of suicide. That life has no value in itself does not mean, however, that Nietzsche indiscriminately approved of every kind of suicide. As noted earlier, Nietzsche's positive evaluation of voluntary death mainly refers to the old man who, having lived his life and reached his goal, freely and autonomously decides that the time has come to take a fully conscious leave of life.

This almost poetic and idealized conception of suicide, most probably inspired by the Stoic tradition, conflicts with Nietzsche's idea of a quick death for the superfluous ones—both the spiritually sick (the pessimists, for whom life is suffering or, in any case, unworthy of living) and the physically sick. Indeed, here the emphasis shifts from freedom and autonomy—recall Zarathustra's terminology "free for death and free in death"—to a veiled, indirect compulsion: death should be preached to those who cowardly cling to life. Judging from a contemporary perspective, Nietzsche's words undoubtedly appear repulsive and unsympathetic. However, this troublesome aspect of his view of suicide should be neither overemphasized—as mentioned, Nietzsche's claims should be read within the wider context of his philosophy and of the cultural and scientific debate of his time—nor instrumentally used to dismiss his arguments in favour of a revaluation of voluntary death.

Nietzsche also considered suicide from what can be defined as a proto-existentialist standpoint, posing (directly or indirectly) the question of whether life is or is not worth living in a world devoid of meaning and purpose. As shown, Nietzsche's constant effort to affirm life and to justify existence proves that he did not succumb to the nihilistic temptation.[86] Strongly influenced by Schopenhauer's worldview, the early Nietzsche rejected his master's

pessimistic solution to the riddle of existence (negation of the will) and took the ancient Greeks as an example of how life can be considered, through art, still possible and worthy, despite its absurd character. The rejection of the artists' metaphysics in the so-called middle period gave the theme of suicide a personal dimension. Nietzsche considered the capacity to endure a meaningless existence without the aid of any metaphysical comfort as being dependent on the strength of one's spirit, which thus became, as in the case of the eternal recurrence, the decisive factor. Finally, in the late period, Nietzsche diagnosed the phenomenon of nihilism, showing how man had been able to shut the door on all suicidal nihilism only at the cost of introducing life-devaluing values and infecting himself with disgust and aversion towards life. The revaluation of all values thus became the main task of his philosophy, and art, conceived as the great stimulant of life, played a pivotal role as countermovement of nihilism.

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Footnotes

1 See Janaway (1998).

2 Schulpforta, or simply Pforta, was (and still is) a school located near Naumburg. Nietzsche enrolled at Schulpforta in 1858.

3 Nietzsche’s letters and posthumous fragments have been only partially translated into English. Among the editions available, I made use of Nietzsche (1968, 1969, and 2003). I have directly translated from German those letters and posthumous fragments which are not included in the aforementioned editions. Nietzsche’s works, posthumous fragments, and letters are available online, in the German original, on *Nietzsche Source* (http://www.nietzschesource.org/).

4 See also PF 3[91], spring 1870: “One cannot get away from the will: what about the ascetics? Suicide? (Is it only possible through inebriation or annihilation of consciousness?) Suicide is possible only through striving towards happiness [*nach glücklichem Sein*]. Non-being [*Nichtsein*] cannot be thought.”

5 In section 9 of *On the Use and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1874), the second of the *Untimely Mediations*, Nietzsche harshly criticizes von Hartmann’s conception of history for focusing on the masses instead of the individuals. According to Nietzsche, exemplary individuals from different ages form “a kind of bridge across the turbulent stream of becoming” (HL, 9/Nietzsche 1997), dialoguing with each other. The task of history is to mediate between them and to inspire the production of what is great. As Nietzsche ironically puts it, “[n]o, the goal of humanity cannot lie in its end but only in its highest exemplars” (ibid.). On Nietzsche’s reception of von Hartmann’s philosophy, see Jensen (2006).

6 The first part of this passage is literally quoted in section 9 of *On the Use and Disadvantage of History for Life*.

7 On this, see Sect. 3.3 of this book.

8 In this sense, Nietzsche's argument seems to be similar to Fox's objection quoted in the previous chapter: "suicide is anything but futile, considering that the successful suicide […] accomplishes exactly what he intended, namely, to destroy his individual life" (Fox 1980:168).

9 During these months, Elisabeth, Nietzsche's sister, played a poisoning role in the relationship between his brother and Salomé.

10 This was because of Nietzsche's relationship with Salomé, who was not esteemed by Nietzsche's mother due to her alleged immoral behaviour.

11 Although among ancient philosophers Epicureans, Cynics, and Cyrenaics generally admitted the possibility of suicide, Nietzsche's view of suicide bears striking similarities with that of Roman Stoicism, particularly Seneca. Nietzsche knew the Stoic philosophy through primary (Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Cicero) and secondary (Diogenes Laertius and Plutarch) sources, among others. As Martha Nussbaum (1994: 149) points out, "Nietzsche's classical education focused intensively on Stoicism. Among his first scholarly publications were three studies—still valuable—of Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Philosophers*, one of our major sources for Stoic thought. And the works of Seneca and Epictetus are among the most heavily read and annotated in his library." Although Wienand *et al*. (2018: 164) are right to point out that there is no *explicit* element (in section 185 of *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, which constitutes the specific focus of their paper, as well as in the other sections dedicated to suicide) which indicates that Nietzsche acquiesces to the Stoic position on suicide, the many similarities shared by Nietzsche's and the Stoics' view of suicide, together with Nietzsche's profound knowledge of Stoicism, suggest that it is plausible to assume that Nietzsche's stance on suicide was influenced by the Stoics' view, particularly Seneca's. In this sense, the reference to "the heads of Greek philosophy and the most upright Roman patriots […] accustomed to die by suicide" in HH I, 80 might be a veiled allusion to the Stoics. On Seneca and suicide, see particularly the letter to Ida Overbeck of 24 May 1880 (L, #28).

12 This conception in which a goal and an heir are linked together is typical of the whole of *Zarathustra* and reappears at the end of the speech *On Free Death*: "Truly, Zarathustra has a goal, he threw his ball. Now you my friends are the heirs of my goal, to you I throw the golden ball. More than anything I like to see you, my friends, throwing the golden ball!" (Z I, *On Free Death*).

13 As Robert C. Solomon (2003: 179) points out, "'Die at the right time' is a sadly ironic epitaph for this man [Nietzsche] who died on the one hand all too early and on the other hand a decade too late."

14 It might be worth recalling that in classical antiquity suicide was deemed as laudable also because it was committed on behalf of friends or the country. For an overview of self-killing in classical antiquity, see van Hooff (1990).

15 See, besides section 80 of *Human, All Too Human*, PF 19[41], October–December 1876. See also BGE, 62.

16 See PF 3[20], spring 1880.

17 In the quoted posthumous fragment there is a fine pun between "practical nihilism [*Nihilismus der That*]" and "the deed of nihilism [*That des Nihilismus*]" that Kaufmann's translation does not reproduce. Practical nihilism is the kind of nihilism which leads to action, that is, to annihilate one's life. For Nietzsche, suicide is therefore the true deed of nihilism: it is nihilism translated into practice and brought to completion.

18 See the previous version (*Vorstufe*) of section 80 of *Human, All Too Human*: “Christianity has falsified the human feeling on this matter: we must learn to feel in a natural way” (Nietzsche 1999b: 129).

19 See particularly TI, *Morality as Anti-Nature*, 1.

20 A clarification has to be made: Nietzsche’s approval of suicide in the case of old and sick men is not in contradiction with the high value for life he attaches to sickness. The fight against sickness simply loses its meaning when it becomes a mere desire to artificially postpone by all means the moment of death.

21 It might also be that, when defining natural death as “the suicide of nature,” Nietzsche does not mean that natural death is unnatural. A later passage from *Twilight of the Idols*, however, encourages precisely this interpretation: “Here we must defy all the cowardlinesses of prejudice and establish above all the correct, i.e. physiological appreciation of so-called *natural* death: which is ultimately just another ‘unnatural’ one, a suicide” (TI, *Raids*, 36). I thank Marta Faustino for pressing me on this point.

22 This dichotomy is unusual not only because Nietzsche makes use of “the metaphysical language of dualism” (Wienand *et al*. 2018: 164), but also in the light of his later rejection of the traditional dualism body–soul (*Leib–Seele*). As he puts it in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “body am I through and through, and nothing besides; and soul is just a word for something on the body” (Z I, *On the Despisers of the Body*). He then replaces this dualism with the distinction I–self (*Ich–Selbst*). Andreas Urs Sommer’s plausible hypothesis is that, in section 185 of *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, Nietzsche is cunningly using the thought structures of dualistic metaphysics for the purpose of their *reductio ad absurdum* (Sommer 2010: 171).

23 See *Phaedo*, 67 C-D/Plato 1997.

24 The allusion is here to the divine calling. See *Phaedo*, 62c.

25 Nietzsche’s claim that natural death is death independent of all reason because it is the irrational being which determines the moment in which the rational being should die might be regarded as surprising if contrasted with his attribution to the body of a greater rationality than the conscious I. See the following passage from the aforementioned speech “On the Despisers of the Body”: “The body is a great reason. […] There is more reason in your body than in your best wisdom” (Z I, *On the Despisers of the Body*). It must be recalled, however, that more than three years separate the publication of *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (published at the end of 1879, but dated 1880) from the publication of the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (spring 1883).

26 Taking into account what Nietzsche himself writes in section 185 (namely that involuntary (natural) death is irrational and worthy of no glorification outside the religious mode of thinking, whereas voluntary death is rational), is it not plausible to assume that, of the two options available—(1) stopping the machine when its work has been completed and (2) letting the machine run until its deterioration—Nietzsche endorses the first option, because he finds it more rational? Note also that, although most of the section is dedicated to the critique of involuntary (natural) death, which for Nietzsche is irrational death, the title of the aphorism is *Of Rational Death*. This is because Nietzsche is here defending the rationality of voluntary death by opposition to the irrationality of involuntary (natural) death. It is precisely within this context that the final allusion to “the wise regulation and disposal of death” belonging to the morality of the future must be understood (WS, 185).

27 On this paper, see the caveat in note 12 of Chap. 2 of this book.

28 As Battin (1996: 115) points out, “there is little consensus among the philosophers on the precise characterization of rationality in general, and so no agreement on what might count as standards for rational suicide or for a rational choice of any sort.” Battin herself provides a set of criteria for rationality: ability to reason, realistic worldview, and adequacy of information (*nonimpairment* criteria), avoidance of harm and accordance with fundamental interests (*satisfaction of interests* criteria). Nothing of the sort can be found in Nietzsche: as already

mentioned, his approach to suicide is unsystematic and not analytical. On the rationality of suicide, see particularly Brandt (1975), Battin (1996: 114–136), Devine (1998), Wittwer (2003: 49–296), and Cowley (2006).

29 See Simon (2000). On Nietzsche's rejection of Kant's claim that human beings are ends in themselves, see particularly PF 26[86], summer–autumn 1884. On Nietzsche's reception of Kant's ethics, see the recent volume edited by Constâncio and Bailey (2017).

30 See the following passages from *Ecce* Homo: "the greatness of my task" (EH, *Preface*, 1), "the *destiny* of the task" (EH, *Clever*, 9), "my task and its world-historical aspect" (EH, *Human, All Too Human*, 6), "the tremendous task of the *Revaluation*" (EH, *Twilight of the Idols*, 3).

31 As already mentioned, Nietzsche would have probably committed suicide in the winter of 1882–83 if he did not have a goal in mind, namely, the writing of the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

32 As shown in Sect. 2.3.3 of this book, this is the aspect of the Stoic view of suicide that Kant emphasizes in his *Metaphysics of Morals* (6: 422/Kant 1991): when he could be of no more use in life, the Stoic sage considered suicide as a rational choice *even in the absence* of present or anticipated ills.

33 See Goeschel (2009: 20).

34 The term "free death" appears in the *Nachlass* only once, namely in the posthumous fragment 14[1], summer 1883. This note contains a number of topics (among which, free death) listed under the heading *Philosophy of the Future*. This was the title of the new book that Nietzsche planned to write. Eventually, Nietzsche published in 1886 *Beyond Good and Evil*, adding the following subtitle: *Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*.

35 Nietzsche also employs the word "Selbsttödtung" (for instance, in MA I, 80) and "Selbstvernichtung" (in relation with Schopenhauer or pessimism).

36 See Sect. 2.2.3 of this book, dedicated to Kant's *freedom argument*.

37 Obviously, when one takes the decision to commit suicide one still exists and, as such, the *decision* to commit suicide can without contradiction (and not metaphorically) be considered an expression of one's freedom.

38 See Jaspers (1997: 324): "In Nietzsche's view, ascendency over death is properly actualized above all in *suicide*."

39 See Wienand *et al*. (2018: 166).

40 See, for instance, Nietzsche's idea of freedom in TI, *Raids*, 38. The secondary literature on Nietzsche on free will or on his notion of freedom is rich. See, among others, Gemes and May (2009) and Constâncio (2012). On Nietzsche's positive model of free will, see the recent paper by Forster (2019).

41 On the relation between Nietzsche's view of suicide and autonomy, see Wienand *et al*. (2018: 167).

42 As Bernard Reginster (2006: 229) points out, we should not confuse *amor fati* either with *resignation* ("the acceptance of aspects of life we deplore but recognize to be inevitable") or with *concealment* ("the effort to mask the necessity of those deplorable aspects"). As Nietzsche puts it in *Ecce Homo*: "My formula for human greatness is *amor fati*: that you do not want anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards, not for all eternity. Not just to

tolerate necessity, still less to conceal it—all idealism is hypocrisy towards necessity –, but to *love* it…" (EH, *Clever*, 10/Nietzsche 2005).

43 Nietzsche's position is, once again, similar to Seneca's, as the following passage from the letters to Lucilius shows: "To such a life, as you are aware, one should not always cling. For mere living is not a good, but living well. Accordingly, the wise man will live as long as he ought, not as long as he can [*Itaque sapiens vivet quantum debet, non quantum potest*]. […] He [the sage man] always reflects concerning the quality, and not the quantity, of his life [*qualis vita, non quanta sit*]. […] It is not a question of dying earlier or later, but of dying well or ill. And dying well means escape from the danger of living ill" (Seneca 1925, Vol. 2: 57–59).

44 The German "grinsender Tod" would be better translated as "sneering death."

45 The idea of death as a festival can be already found in the posthumous fragment 11[82], spring–autumn 1881: "Suicide as the common way to die: new pride of man, who puts himself his limit and invents a new *festival*—the passing away."

46 On the wisdom of Silenus, see *infra*. See also note 34 of Chap. 3 of this book.

47 The use of the term "preachers" (German: *Prediger*) should not mislead. Nietzsche is not criticizing religious pessimism but rather the philosophical pessimism of his time. Nietzsche was well acquainted with nineteenth-century German pessimism (besides Schopenhauer, he had read Mainländer, Bahnsen, and von Hartmann) and he had given much thought to it, as he himself acknowledges, for instance, in section 56 of *Beyond Good and Evil*.

48 This sounds like a straw man argument, but Nietzsche's attitude is deliberately mocking and paradoxical.

49 See, for instance, Goffi (2004: 23).

50 See Moore (2002), Holub (2007), and Salanskis (2013). The question concerning the status of the *Nachlass* is a complex one. In a nutshell, my position is that the posthumous fragments must be considered for what they are, namely notes. This means that if on the one hand the *Nachlass* cannot be granted the same status as published writings, on the other, it is nevertheless a useful tool to achieve a better understanding of the ideas that Nietzsche entertained and was working on in the different periods of his life.

51 Abundant textual evidence can be found in Moore (2002), Holub (2007), and Salanskis (2013). In the posthumous fragment 15[3] from spring 1888, Nietzsche defends the idea that chronically sick persons and neurasthenics should not be allowed to procreate. He makes a similar claim in a later note: "The Biblical prohibition 'thou shalt not kill' is a piece of naiveté compared with the seriousness of the prohibition of life to decadents: 'thou shalt not procreate!'—Life itself recognizes no solidarity, no 'equal rights', between the healthy and the degenerate parts of an organism: one must excise the latter—or the whole will perish.—Sympathy for decadents, equal rights for the ill-constituted—that would be the profoundest immorality, that would be antinature itself as morality!" (PF 23[1], October 1888). See also PF 22[23], September–October 1888. These are only but few examples. According to Moore (2002: 135), "Nietzsche entertained similar ideas as early as 1876, looking forward in one note to a future 'extinction of bad races' and the 'breeding of better ones'. […] Later eugenics statements written in the last year of his creative life […] add nothing new except perhaps a more radical, urgent tone."

52 In the posthumous fragment 14[5] from spring 1888, for instance, Nietzsche criticizes Christianity for having favoured a practice contrary to the species' interest. According to Nietzsche's interpretation, even though Christianity brought the doctrine of altruism to the fore, its real historical effect was the intensification of egoism. An equal value was assigned to each individual, be it healthy or sick. As a consequence, the interests of the species were subordinated to those of the individual. This, however, goes against "the natural course of evolution… and all natural *values* are overturned" (PF 14[5], spring 1888). Christianity has a "dangerous anti-natural character," Nietzsche concludes, which "thwarts *natural selection*" (ibid.).

53 Nietzsche's main sources are Francis Galton's *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (1883) and Charles Féré's *Dégénérescence et criminalité. Essai physiologique* (1888).

54 According to Schopenhauer, "if we could castrate all the scoundrels, stick all the stupid geese in a convent, give an entire harem to each man of noble character and men (intact ones) to all the girls of spirit and understanding, then a generation would soon arise that would constitute an age superior to that of Pericles" (WWR II: 544). I owe this reference to Salanskis (2013: 183).

55 See Salanskis (2013: 171). As Holub (2007: 185) points out, "advocates of eugenics were not exclusively right-wing ideologues, but individuals whose self-understanding was that they were acting in the spirit of enlightened thought."

56 See Salanskis (2013: 169). On the question of whether and to what extent Nietzsche should be held responsible for his ideas, see Stellino (2017).

57 This passage can also be read as an allusion to the famous lines from Calderón's *Life's a Dream*: "for birth itself is man's greatest crime [Pues el delito mayor / Del hombre es haber nacido]" (Calderón de la Barca, 2004: 93). Schopenhauer quotes this passage in section 51 of *The World as Will and Representation*.

58 See, particularly, GS 357.

59 The risk is to renounce life, that is, to embrace the pessimistic attitude of the soothsayer from the second part of the *Zarathustra*, who speaks thus: "– and I saw a great sadness descend over humanity. The best became weary of their works. / A doctrine circulated, a belief accompanied it: 'Everything is empty, everything is the same, everything was!' / And from every hilltop it rang out: 'Everything is empty, everything is the same, everything was!' / We harvested well, but why did all our fruits turn foul and brown? What fell down from the evil moon last night? / All work was for naught, our wine has become poison, the evil eye seared yellow our fields and hearts. […] 'Oh where is there still a sea in which one could drown?'—thus rings our lament—out across the shallow swamps. / Indeed, we have already become too weary to die; now we continue to wake and we live on—in burial chambers!" (Z II, *The Soothsayer*). As Wicks (2005: 107) points out, this is the same pessimistic and defeatist view that one finds in the book of Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth).

60 See, among other studies, Reginster (2006). Although Reginster does not directly tackle the theme of suicide, he considers many related aspects, to which I can only briefly allude here.

61 I therefore disagree with Paul Loeb, who claims that Camus' problem in his *The Myth of Sisyphus* (to judge whether life is or is not worth living; Camus 1975: 11) is absolutely worthy of consideration for Nietzsche "not as a question to be answered, but as a symptom of the profound and ineradicable drive to suicide built into the human animal" (Loeb 2008: 164).

62 Nietzsche clarifies that "these representations are the *sublime*, whereby the terrible is tamed by artistic means, and the *comical*, whereby disgust at absurdity is discharged by artistic means" (BT, 7). Note that according to the young Nietzsche not just art but science as well seeks a justification of existence. The mission of science is in fact "to make existence appear comprehensible and thus justified" (BT, 15), whereas the theoretical man is protected against the "practical ethic of pessimism" (ibid.) by the satisfaction and delight he finds in uncovering and unmasking the truth. With their faith that the nature of things can be fathomed, knowledge and understanding become a panacea, a violent stimulus towards existence. However, despite his will to honesty, the life of the theoretical man is based on a profound metaphysical illusion: "the imperturbable belief that thought, as it follows the thread of causality, reaches down into the deepest abysses of being" (ibid.). Here we find a new form of "Greek serenity [*Heiterkeit*]" and blessedness of existence, but the faith of the theoretical man is nonetheless doomed to crumble: "Science, spurred on by its powerful delusion, is hurrying unstoppably to its limits, where the optimism hidden in the essence of logic will founder and break up. For there is an infinite number of points on the periphery of the circle of science, and while we have no way of foreseeing how the circle could ever be completed, a noble and gifted man inevitably encounters, before the mid-point of his existence, boundary points on the periphery like this, where he stares into that which cannot be illuminated. When, to his horror, he sees how logic curls up around itself at these limits and finally bites its own tail, then a new form of knowledge breaks through, *tragic knowledge*, which, simply to be endured, needs art for protection and as medicine" (ibid.). In this way, the "insatiable greed of

optimistic knowledge"—the enemy of art on its lower level—turns paradoxically into "tragic resignation and a need for art" (ibid.): the function of art is once again to make existence endurable to us despite its whole meaninglessness and absurdity. For a general overview of the relation between art and science in Nietzsche, see Babich (1994).

63 On this, see Soll (1998). According to Schopenhauer, the role of the subjective component of aesthetic pleasure is "the liberation of cognition from service to the will, forgetting oneself as an individual, and the elevation of consciousness to the pure, will-less, timeless subject of cognition, independent of all relations" (WWR I: 223/Schopenhauer 2010). For a wider analysis of the similarities and differences between Schopenhauer's and the early Nietzsche's views of art, life, and tragedy, see Nussbaum (1999).

64 In the later *Attempt at Self-Criticism*, Nietzsche asks whether there exists "pessimism of strength," establishing a clear dividing line between Schopenhauer's resigned pessimism and his Dionysiac valuation of life. An open question is to what extent Nietzsche is here reinterpreting *The Birth of Tragedy* through the lens of his later philosophy of art. However, I would personally reject Julian Young's reading, according to which "*The Birth* is a life-denying work," "life is not worth living," and that, like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche "denies (human) life" (see Young 1992: 48 and 54). Such a pessimistic picture sits uneasily with Nietzsche's hopes that "beneath this restlessly agitated cultural life and senseless education there lies hidden a magnificent, inwardly healthy, ancient strength, which admittedly only stirs powerfully in momentous times and then returns to dreaming of some future awakening" (BT, 23).

65 On this, see Stellino (2019).

66 The metaphor of the colours is typical of the projectivist tradition. See, for instance, Hume's famous distinction between reason and taste in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*: whereas reason "discovers objects, as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution," taste "has a productive faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises, in a manner, a new creation" (Hume 1983: 88).

67 With the death of God, announced by the madman in section 125 of *The Gay Science*, the awareness of the meaninglessness of existence increases even more. The questions asked by the same madman highlight the feeling of disorientation deriving from this "event": "Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sidewards, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren't we straying as though through an infinite nothing? […] God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!" (GS, 125).

68 Here Nietzsche alludes again to the veils of illusion, which art provides to man (in this case, the poet). The relation between poets and illusion/lie is a recurrent theme in Nietzsche. Well-known is Zarathustra's claim that "poets lie too much" (Z II, *On the Blessed Isles* and *On Poets*). See also HH I, 148, titled "Poets as Alleviators of Life."

69 In passing, it should be mentioned that the Russian philosopher Lev Shestov defined Nietzsche's philosophy precisely as "philosophy of tragedy" (see his *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy* contained in Shestov 1969). According to Shestov, Nietzsche—like Dostoevsky and unlike systematic philosophers—did not avoid confronting and acknowledging life's horror and chaos, recognizing that philosophy cannot help being but tragic philosophy. On the tragic consequences of knowing and acknowledging the truth, see in particular section 109 of the first volume of *Human, All Too Human*: "The tragedy […] lies in the fact that one cannot *believe* these dogmas of religion and metaphysics if one has in one's heart and head the rigorous methods of acquiring truth, while on the other hand one has, through the development of humanity, grown so tender, sensitive and afflicted one has need of means of cure and comfort of the most potent description; from which there thus arises the danger that man may bleed to death from knowledge of truth" (HH I, 109).

70 The relation between knowledge, truth, and strength of a spirit is clearly highlighted by the following passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*: "Something could be true even if it is harmful and dangerous to the highest degree. It could even be part of the fundamental character of existence that people with complete knowledge get destroyed,—so that the strength [*Stärke*] of a spirit would be proportionate to how much of the 'truth' he could withstand—or, to put it more clearly, to what extent he *needs* it to be thinned out, veiled over, sweetened up, dumbed down, and lied

about" (BGE, 39). See also the following passage from the *Preface* to the new edition of the second volume of *Human, All Too Human*: "there is a will to the tragic and to pessimism that is as much a sign of severity and strength of intellect (taste, feeling, conscience). With this will in one's heart one has no fear of the fearful and questionable that characterizes all existence; one even seeks it out. Behind such a will there stands courage, pride, the longing for a *great* enemy" (HH II, *Preface*, 7).

71 Nietzsche's change of attitude towards art and metaphysics in *Human, All Too Human* is already patent in the first section of this work where, as mentioned, Nietzsche juxtaposes two different conceptions of philosophy, the *metaphysical* and the *historical*, defending the latter against the former. See also the following passage from section 3 of the same work: "It is the mark of a higher culture to value the little unpretentious truths which have been discovered by means of rigorous method more highly than the errors handed down by metaphysical and artistic ages and men, which blind us and make us happy" (HH I, 3). For an analysis of the relation between art and science in *Human, All Too Human*, see Ridley (2007: 41–46).

72 Section 343 opens the fifth book of *The Gay Science*. It must be recalled that the fifth book was added in the second edition of the work published in 1887, that is, five years after the first edition. On that occasion, Nietzsche added a preface and the *Songs of Prince Vogelfrei* as well.

73 See, particularly, Soll (1973) and Loeb (2008). My analysis of the eternal recurrence is indebted to Loeb's. His interpretation of the eternal recurrence is, however, very different from—if not opposed to—the one I propose here. On this, see Stellino (2013: 168, n. 41).

74 As Loeb (2008: 181) rightly points out, "it is not just the thought of meaninglessness, but the thought of meaninglessness *eternally*."

75 In Young's opinion, Camus' account is not convincing: "toughness is not enough; not enough to constitute a worthwhile life. *Do* we, in fact, 'imagine Sisyphus happy'? Surely not. Surely our response to his predicament is not admiration but rather *pity*. […] Sisyphus is of course immortal. To make him relevant to the question of suicide, however, he has to be given that option. And given the option it is far from clear that he should not take it" (Young 2003: 165f.).

76 Young puts forward a similar reading of Nietzsche's late philosophy. However, his focus is more on the individual, personal aspect of the creation of meaning. As he puts it, "[f]or traditional thinkers […] the meaning of life is something we *discover*: we do not *choose* or *make* it to be the case. These two features—universality and givenness—characterise every grand-narrative philosophy. All true-world philosophers, of whatever shape or hue, presuppose that these two features must characterise any genuine answer to the question of the meaning of life. Suppose, however, that we now reject both of them. Suppose we acknowledge that there are no true worlds, that every grand narrative is a fiction, that reality is, in Nietzsche's sense, 'chaos'. And suppose we further conclude (at least, for the time being) that there is no such thing as *the*—universal—meaning of life, that no meaning is written into the metaphysical structure of reality. Still, one might reflect, that doesn't mean that *my* life can't have meaning. It doesn't mean that I can't *create* meaning in my life, my own *individual* meaning" (Young 2003: 85). In few words, "even in the absence of a *grand* narrative there seems no reason why one should not be able to construct a *personal* narrative" (*id*.: 86). Note that although in my analysis I have put the emphasis on the more collective (so to say) function of revaluation, I do not mean to deny that in Nietzsche there is also a strong emphasis on the individual aspect of the creation of meaning, as Young rightly points out.

77 The whole third treatise of the *Genealogy* is dedicated to the question: what do ascetic ideals mean? As Simon May (1999: 81) points out, "in general terms, ascetic thinking posits a domain of high value, towards which we strive, that is generally in conflict or in competition with a domain of lesser or negative value, over which we seek mastery and which must therefore be suppressed, destroyed, or transcended." See also Schopenhauer's definition of asceticism in note 64 of Chap. 3 of this book. As mentioned, according to Nietzsche's interpretation, the ascetic ideal was man's only meaning so far. This caused a devaluation of and an aversion to life (the domain of lesser or negative value), which brought with itself a "hatred of the human, and even more of the animalistic, even more of the material," a "horror of the senses, of reason itself," a "fear of happiness and beauty," a "longing to get away from appearance, transience, growth, death, wishing, longing itself" (GM, III, 28). In few words, the ascetic ideal provoked "a rebellion against the most fundamental prerequisites of life" (ibid.).

78 See GM, III, 15 and 20.

79 This theme already plays a pivotal role in *The Birth of Tragedy*. However, as Gianni Vattimo (2002: 57) has pointed out, the meaning of the theme is quite different here: "It is not a question here of following Schopenhauer, of fleeing from the chaos of the will into a world of forms, which is removed from the struggle for life that dominates the world of appearances. It is instead a question of making bearable the knowledge that those errors on which life and knowledge are founded are unavoidable, and of acknowledging that this is the sole source of the beauty and richness of our existence." In his *Nietzsche on Art*, Ridley draws attention to a terminological distinction which reveals a conceptual difference between *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Gay Science*: in the former, existence is *justified* (*gerechtfertigt*), whereas in the latter, existence is *bearable* (*erträglich*). As Ridley (2007: 80) puts it, "[e]ternal justification requires, at the very least, that what does the justifying be true, and in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche thought that he had a candidate for that. But in *The Gay Science* it is precisely the truth that is the problem, and so art, which is enlisted in order to falsify, in order to *evade* the truth, can no longer, even potentially, offer justifications of existence (eternal or otherwise). It can, at most, offer to make it liveable."

80 See the following posthumous fragments: 14[35, 47, 117, 119, 169, and 170], spring 1888; 16[51], spring–summer 1888.

81 See GS, 344.

82 For a more detailed analysis of the relation between art and affirmation in Nietzsche's philosophy, see Reginster (2014).

83 For a contrasting reading of Nietzsche's late philosophy of art, see Young (1992: 117–147). According to Young, in the end, Nietzsche "returns to the inauthenticity, the illusionism" (*id*.: 148) of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Pessimism and the wisdom of Silenus are regarded as true: "Real life, the life of human individuality, is something it would be better we had never been born into. To the extent, therefore, that its main aim is to be the 'antipode' to Schopenhauerianism, to 'affirm life', Nietzsche's philosophy ends in failure" (ibid.).

84 Nietzsche's late conception of art as a stimulant of life appears also in the *oeuvre*. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche rejects the idea at the heart of *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake). To be more precise, he agrees that art should not necessarily have a moral purpose. In his view, however, it does not follow from this that art should not have any purpose at all: "The struggle against purpose in art is always a struggle against the *moralizing* tendency in art, against its subordination to morality. *L'art pour l'art* means 'the devil take morality!' But even this enmity betrays the overwhelming force of prejudice. Once you take away from art the purpose of preaching morality and improving humanity, the result is still a far cry from art as completely purposeless, aimless, senseless, in short *l'art pour l'art*—a worm biting its own tail. […] Art is the great stimulant to life: how could one conceive of it as purposeless, aimless, *l'art pour l'art* ?" (TI, *Raids*, 24). See also the posthumous fragment 15[10], in which Nietzsche rejects Aristotle's understanding of tragedy as "purgative" (see also AC, 7) and defines art as "the great stimulant of life, an intoxication with life, a will to life" (PF 15[10], spring 1888).

85 *Nietzsche contra Wagner* essentially consists of a selection of passages extracted from Nietzsche's previous works. The two sections of the *Epilogue* are a reworking of sections 3 and 4 of the new *Preface* to the second edition of *The Gay Science*.

86 Nietzsche's reception of Kirillov (one of the characters of Dostoevsky's *The Devils*, who commits suicide in order to deny God's existence and affirm his self-will) is in this sense paradigmatic. Despite scholars' recurrent attempts to stress the similarities between Kirillov's theory and Nietzsche's philosophy, Nietzsche did not perceive Kirillov as a Dionysian type but rather, as Miller (1975: 170–180) has convincingly demonstrated, as a decadent and Buddhist one. Moreover, Kirillov's blind faith in his theory, which leads him to martyrdom, makes him a typical representative of that kind of fanaticism, which Nietzsche criticizes in his writings. On this, see Stellino (2015a: 203–214).

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5. Ludwig Wittgenstein: Suicide as the Elementary Sin

Paolo Stellino[1] ✉
(1) Nova Institute of Philosophy, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, LISBOA, Portugal

✉ **Paolo Stellino**
Email: paolo.stellino@fcsh.unl.pt

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Unlike Kant's, Schopenhauer's, and Nietzsche's, Wittgenstein's remarks on suicide are very few in number. During his lifetime, Wittgenstein published only one major work (the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1921), one book review (of Peter Coffey's *The Science of Logic*, 1913), and an article (*Some Remarks on Logical Forms*, 1929), as well as a letter to the editor of *Mind* (1933) and a spelling dictionary for use in elementary schools (1926), dating from the time when Wittgenstein was a schoolteacher in Austria. Whereas some of the last propositions of the *Tractatus* are devoted to the subject of death, suicide is not mentioned. This topic is also virtually absent in Wittgenstein's posthumous writings and *Nachlass*, so that his considerations on suicide are essentially reduced to three sources: (1) a famous note from the *Notebooks*, dating from 10 January 1917, written during the First World War; (2) two letters to his friend Paul Engelmann, dating from 30 May and 21 June 1920; and (3) an entry in the so-called Koder Diaries (also known as Manuscript 183[1]), dating from 7 November or December 1931, written during Wittgenstein's stay in Cambridge.[2]

It would be, however, a mistake to conclude from the few considerations left on the subject that Wittgenstein did not give any importance or consideration to the thought of suicide. On the contrary, as Gómez Alonso (2018) shows in one of the few existing studies dedicated to Wittgenstein's view of suicide, the question of suicide, such as Wittgenstein raises it, is far from being a side issue. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that suicide was for Wittgenstein an intensely personal matter. In the early period, Wittgenstein often had suicidal thoughts. In September 1913, at the age of twenty-four, he even told his beloved friend David Pinsent that "all his life there had hardly been a day, in which he had not at one time or other thought of suicide as a possibility" (Wright 1990: 81). The thought of suicide was so recurrent, that if confronted with the prospect of an eternal recurrence of life, as envisaged by the demon in Nietzsche's *Gay Science* (§341), Wittgenstein would have surely failed the test: "He was really surprised when I said I never thought of suicide like that," Pinsent continues, "and that given the chance I would not mind living my life so far—over again! He would not for anything" (ibid.).

For Wittgenstein, suicide was an intensely personal matter also for another reason. Scholars have already emphasized the disastrous consequences of the pressure exerted on his children by Karl, Wittgenstein's authoritarian father, a successful industrialist who insisted that his children pursued a career in industry and continued his business.[3] Two, probably three, of Ludwig's brothers committed suicide. Hans (Johannes), Karl's eldest son, mysteriously disappeared in 1902, while in America. He had grown obsessed with Schopenhauer's philosophy and it is not clear whether he committed suicide, had an

accident, or lived a full life abroad, far from his family. According to Alexander Waugh (2009: 29), "the most likely scenario is that he did indeed commit suicide somewhere outside Austria."

The sources also differ on the details of the two other brothers' suicide. On the evening of 2 May 1904, Rudi (Rudolf) took potassium cyanide in a Berlin restaurant-bar. It is not clear whether Rudi committed suicide because of his homosexuality, a venereal disease, the death of a beloved friend, or even the economic difficulties in his Berlin life. Be as it may, Rudi was buried in Vienna without honour and his suicide was felt as humiliating by his father, who forbade uttering the name of his son in his presence. Kurt's suicide in 1918, at the end of the First World War, was on the contrary perceived as an honourable death. Kurt probably shot himself after the troops under his command refused to obey his orders. Waugh (2009: 127–128) reports four different versions of his death, all of them agreeing on the fact that Kurt killed himself, although it is noteworthy that, in a letter to William Eccles dating from 7 May 1925, Wittgenstein wrote that his brother "was killed" (Eccles 1963: 62). In any case, for the surviving members of the family, Kurt was the family hero.

During the First World War, Ludwig also had serious concerns about the possibility that his fourth brother, Paul, the one closest in age to him, might take his life. Paul had a promising concert pianist career when the war broke out. In the early stages of the war, during the Battle of Galicia in 1914, he was severely wounded in his right arm, which was later amputated. To make matters worse, right after the operation he was taken prisoner by the Russians, who deported him to prison camps in Russia and Siberia. After receiving the news, Ludwig, who by the time was serving on a small river gunboat, wrote in his diary: "I keep having to think of poor Paul who has suddenly *lost his career*! How terrible. What philosophy is needed to get over it! If only this can be achieved in any other way than suicide!!"[4] (GT 28.10.14/Wittgenstein 1992). Fortunately, Paul did not commit suicide. With incredibly strong determination, he kept on playing and decided to continue his career as a left-handed pianist. It was for him that, between 1929 and 1930, Ravel composed the famous *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand*.[5]

Besides these family tragedies,[6] the young Wittgenstein was, more or less directly, affected by three other important suicides. The first of them was Otto Weininger's suicide in 1903. Weininger was an Austrian philosopher, who took his life at the age of twenty-three, having recently published *Sex and Character*, a book that exerted a strong influence on Wittgenstein. Several years later, when he was in Olmütz, Wittgenstein once told his friends that Weininger's suicide still disturbed him (McGuinnes 1990: 254). In 1906, three years after Weininger's suicide, Ludwig Boltzmann, the Austrian physicist and philosopher, also took his life. Wittgenstein left school in the summer of that year and wished to study under Boltzmann in Vienna. His wish was, however, frustrated by Boltzmann's suicide on 5 September. Finally, in November 1914, Wittgenstein was supposed to meet the Austrian poet Georg Trakl, who at the time was at the military hospital in Krakow as a psychiatric patient. Few days before the *Goplana* (the gunboat on which Wittgenstein was serving) arrived at Krakow, Trakl took his life with an overdose of cocaine. Wittgenstein, who was suffering from depression and was really looking forward to meeting Trakl ("I really miss someone with whom I can talk," he wrote in his diary; GT 5.11.14) was much shaken at the sad news.[7]

According to Monk (1991: 12), until the suicides of his two brothers Hans and Rudi, "Ludwig showed none of the self-destructiveness epidemic among the Wittgensteins of his generation." However, a note quoted by McGuinness (an undated reminiscence of Wittgenstein, made—according to McGuiness—in the 1920s or 1930s) shows how Ludwig entertained suicidal thoughts already at the age of ten or eleven, either in 1900 or in 1901, that is, before Hans' alleged suicide.[8] At any rate, there is little doubt that Hans' and Rudi's death exacerbated Ludwig's inclination for suicide, and it is no surprise that in 1912 he told Pinsent that for nine years (that is, starting from 1903, *after* Hans' disappearance), till last Christmas,

> he suffered from terrific loneliness: that he continually thought of suicide then, and felt ashamed of never daring to kill himself: he put it that he had had "a hint that he was *de trop* in this world," but that he had meanly disregarded it. He had been brought up to engineering, for which he had neither taste nor talent. And only recently he had tried philosophy and come up here to study under Russell which had proved his salvation: for Russell had given him encouragement. (Wright 1990: 6)

As this entry in Pinsent's diary shows, Wittgenstein's recurrent thoughts of suicide were provoked not only by his feeling lonely or unfit for this world but also by his father's decision (or better, imposition) that he be brought up to a discipline which, like his brothers, he disliked. His turning to philosophy, together with Russell's acknowledgement of his genius, saved him, although only temporarily.[9] For Wittgenstein continued to entertain suicidal thoughts at least until the early 1920s, when he was a schoolteacher in Austria, as the correspondence with his friend Paul Engelmann shows.

Wittgenstein was a tormented spirit. The so-called secret diaries of 1914–1916[10] bear abundant testimony of Wittgenstein's feeling of being an indecent and sinful man as well as of his strong sense of duty—"I do not fear to be shot, but rather that I will not properly perform my duty," he noted on 12 September 1914 (GT 12.9.14). An oft-quoted anecdote from Russell gives an adequate picture of Wittgenstein's troubled inner state of mind: "Once I said to him: 'Are you thinking about logic or about your sins?' 'Both', he replied, and continued his pacing. I did not like to suggest that it was time for bed, as it seemed probable both to him and me that on leaving me he would commit suicide" (Russell 2010: 313). Wittgenstein was ruthless in the ethical demands he made on himself, and if he felt ashamed of never daring to kill himself, as he told Pinsent, he also often felt ashamed of having thought of suicide as a solution for his personal problems. For as he wrote to Engelmann, he considered that suicide was "always a dirty thing to do" (Engelmann 1967: 33).

Philosophy and Russell were not the only means of salvation for Wittgenstein. In fact, from the reading of his diaries and letters, a recurrent pattern emerges: depression was often followed by suicidal thoughts, from which Wittgenstein was rescued by an *event* that had a positive influence on him. We have already seen that, before the First World War, Wittgenstein was often depressed. On 4 September 1913, during their vacation in Norway, Pinsent wrote in his diary that Wittgenstein was "in an awful neurotic state" and that "he blamed himself violently and expressed the most piteous disgust with himself" (Wright 1990: 67). Wittgenstein, Pinsent adds, even talked "of having at times contemplated suicide" (ibid.). His self-disgust was so strong, his anxiety and depression so frightful, that sometimes he was unable to do his work on logic, as Wittgenstein wrote to Russell on Christmas 1913.[11] The reading of William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1912 proved beneficial and helped him "to get rid of the *Sorge* (in the sense in which Goethe used the word in the 2nd part of Faust)" (McGuinness 2008: 30).[12] It was, however, the fortuitous discovery of Tolstoy's *The Gospel in Brief* in 1914 that virtually kept him alive, as Wittgenstein revealed to Ludwig von Ficker in 1915.[13]

Whether because of his strong sense of duty, his patriotism, or his suicidal tendencies,[14] Wittgenstein enlisted on 7 August 1914, ten days after the Austro–Hungarian Empire's declaration of war against Serbia. His enthusiasm was soon to be curbed: his crewmates were a *Saubande*, a bunch of good-for-nothings. Their coarseness, stupidity, and impudence had no limits (GT 15.8.14). Wittgenstein repeatedly complains in his diaries about their wickedness (*Bosheit*). In this context, the reading of Tolstoy was a relief. He discovered *The Gospel in Brief* by accident: in fact, this was the only book that a small bookshop in Tarnow, Galicia, contained. He began reading Tolstoy's book on 1 September 1914. A month afterwards, he always carried it wherever he went, like a talisman (GT 11.10.14), recommending it to fellow soldiers, who referred to him as "the one with the Gospel" (Rhees 1984: 3).

It might be surprising that Wittgenstein, who had received formal religious instruction but was in his teenage contemptuous of religion (Malcolm 2001: 58), became so fascinated by Tolstoy's peculiar synthesis of the four Gospels. In reality, some years earlier, at about the age of twenty-one, Wittgenstein attended the play *Die Kreuzelschreiber* in Vienna by the Austrian author Ludwig Anzengruber and was profoundly moved by a scene in which the protagonist, being lost and sick, has a mystical experience, feeling that nothing can happen to him and that he belongs to everything and everything belongs to him.[15] As Norman Malcolm relates, "Wittgenstein was struck by this stoic thought; for the first time he saw the possibility of religion" (ibid.). Tolstoy's *The Gospel in Brief* strengthened Wittgenstein's conviction that salvation could be only found by reaching a spiritual independence from the external world and the "dreary, endless, grey sea of becoming" (GT 13.12.14): "I always repeat in my mind Tolstoy's words: 'man is *powerless* in the flesh, but *free* in the spirit.' May the spirit be in me!" (ibid.: 21). In the secret diaries, this conviction goes hand in hand with repeated exhortations to God to give him strength, prayers that God's will be done or simple remarks that God is with him. Russell's account of his meeting with Wittgenstein in The Hague in December 1919 gives an idea of the extent of the spiritual change that the latter had undergone during the war: "I had felt in his book [the *Tractatus*] a flavour of mysticism, but was astonished when I found that he has become a complete mystic" (McGuinness 2008: 112).[16]

Despite this spiritual conversion and the beneficial influence of the discovery and reading of Tolstoy's *The Gospel in Brief*, Wittgenstein continued to suffer from depression, as several entries in the secret diaries show.[17] Depression led him on occasion to suicidal thoughts. On 19 October 1914, he had "no true lust for living [*Lebenslust*]" (GT 19.10.14). On 26 February 1915, he felt lonely (he had no news from Pinsent) and thought of suicide (GT 26.2.15). On 28 March 1916, he suffered the torments of hell and thought again of taking his life, but regained enthusiasm in life, and noted: "I will poison myself, only when I really want to poison myself" (*id.*: 68).

Paradoxically, if war led him to suffer from depression and have suicidal thoughts, it also proved his salvation, as he later told his nephew Felix Salzer (McGuinness 1990: 204). As McGuinness puts it, "[t]he war seems to have provided him paradoxically with the possibility of a new life by focusing his expectations and his attention on danger and death. […] [T]he war 'saved his life', as he put it, by confronting him with the simple task of preparing himself for a good death" (*id.*: 220). Whereas most soldiers would have avoided, if possible, serving on front lines, Wittgenstein continually requested to be sent to the front, and eventually succeeded in his request towards the end of March 1916, when he was posted to a fighting unit on the Russian front. On 15 April 1916, he noted in his diary: "In 8 days, we go to the firing position. Be it granted to me to risk my life in a difficult task!" (GT 15.4.16). It must be noted that Wittgenstein's wish to serve at the front did not derive from hidden or underlying suicidal tendencies, but rather from his hope that proximity to death would bring light and meaning to his life. As he wrote in his diaries, "[m]aybe, proximity to death will bring the light of life" (GT 4.5.16), and "[o]nly death gives life its meaning" (GT 9.5.16).

The danger, to which he was exposed at the front, reconnected him to life and led him to fear death. In reality, Wittgenstein had already feared death before the war. As Pinsent relates, in 1913, while in Cambridge, Wittgenstein was convinced that he was going to die soon and was frightfully worried to waste the few remaining moments of his life (Wright 1990: 75, 77). A letter to Russell, dating from 20 September of the same year, makes clear that his main worry was to die before being able to publish his work on logic (McGuinness 2008: 46). The fear of death he experienced at the front was, however, of a completely different nature. Proximity to death had led him to regain his *Lebenslust*, as an entry dating from 29 July 1916 shows: "I came under fire. I was pusillanimous. I feared death. Now I have so a strong desire to live! And it is difficult to relinquish life when you will it once again" (GT 29.7.16).

For Wittgenstein, the war was a profoundly transforming and cathartic experience. It should therefore not be surprising that in 1919, when the war was over but Wittgenstein was still held as a prisoner of war in a camp in Cassino (Italy), he professed to be "a born again [*ein Wiedergeborener*]" (Parak 1992: 150). Unfortunately, however, the war did not put an end to Wittgenstein's suicidal thoughts, for more complicated times were to come. On 6 July 1918, Pinsent's mother sent a letter announcing that, the previous month, her son David had died in an aeroplane accident. Wittgenstein was devastated by the news. One day during that summer, his uncle Paul came across him at an Austrian railway station: Wittgenstein was on his way to committing suicide somewhere in the mountains.[18] The period after his release on 21 August 1919 was even more difficult. As Monk points out, the Austro–Hungarian Empire was no more, his most beloved friend was dead, he was unable to reunite with either Engelmann or Russell, he was unclear about his future, and he failed to find a publisher for the *Tractatus* or even someone who understood it (Monk 1991: 169–173). As a consequence, Wittgenstein contemplated committing suicide on more than one occasion during the autumn of 1919. A letter to Engelmann, dating from 16 November 1919, shows how troubled Wittgenstein's inner state of mind was: "Just how far I have gone downhill you can see from the fact that I have on several occasions contemplated taking my own life. Not from my despair about my own badness but for purely external reasons" (Engelmann 1967: 21).

Things were not better in the first years of the 1920s. The publishing house Reclam rejected the *Tractatus* and Wittgenstein still grieved the death of his friend—"Nearly every day I remember poor David Pinsent," he wrote to Russell on 19 March 1920 (McGuinness 2008: 116). He was often depressed: "I have had a very miserable time lately, and am still afraid the devil will come and take me one day. I am not joking!" he wrote to Engelmann on 24 April 1920 (Engelmann 1967: 29).[19] Some months later, in September 1920, Wittgenstein took a position as a schoolteacher in Trattenbach, a "beautiful and tiny" village in the mountains of Lower Austria (*id.*: 39). He even reported to be happy in his work at school. However, his initial enthusiasm did not last long. He complained to Russell about the character of the villagers, who were odious, base, good-for-nothing, and irresponsible (McGuinness 2008: 126). He had no one with whom he could talk and found it hard to be a teacher "in this country where people are so completely and utterly without hope" (*id.*: 132). Wittgenstein later moved to Puchberg. His first reaction was one of contempt: "I am now in another hole, though, I have to say, it is no better than the old one. Living with human beings is hard! Only they are not really human, but rather 1/4 animal and 3/4 human," he wrote to Russell in November or December 1922 (*id.*: 136). Soon after his arrival in Puchberg, however, he received the copies of the English edition of the *Tractatus*. He also made few friends, among them the colleague Rudolf Koder, with whom he used to play music. Wittgenstein's life at Puchberg was thus relatively happy—in any event, happier than his previous life at Trattenbach.

In September 1924, Wittgenstein moved to Otterthal, a neighbouring tiny village of Trattenbach. Two years later, on 28 April 1926, he resigned his job. Overall, his experience as a schoolteacher in the Austrian countryside had been unsuccessful but at least he had overcome the great inner crisis experienced during the first years after the end of the war. If suicide had been a relatively recurrent thought from the beginning of the twentieth century (especially, with the deaths of his two brothers Hans and Rudi) to the early 1920s, from this time onwards until the end of his life suicidal thoughts were much less frequent in Wittgenstein's mind—or at least they did not leave any relevant trace either in the correspondence or in the notebooks (with the exception of the entry in the Koder Diaries mentioned earlier). It is therefore not surprising that Wittgenstein's most interesting remarks on suicide (the 1917 note from the *Notebooks* and the two letters to Engelmann from 1920) date from his early period, that is, from a time in which there was a particularly intimate connection between his writings and his life. Accordingly, in what follows, I will focus the attention on Wittgenstein's early period. Since, as we have seen, some of the

books that Wittgenstein read at this time had such a profound influence on him, I will devote Sect. 5.1 to some of the sources that played an important role in his view of suicide. Subsequently, in order to contextualize his otherwise obscure remarks on suicide, I will offer an overview of Wittgenstein's peculiar worldview as well as of his understanding of ethics (Sect. 5.2). Finally, in Sect. 5.3, I will turn the attention to Wittgenstein's remarks on suicide, explaining their meaning and elucidating Wittgenstein's peculiar view of suicide.

5.1 The Sources

It has been widely acknowledged that Wittgenstein's early thought was profoundly influenced by Schopenhauer's transcendental idealism. This influence is patent both in the *Tractatus* and in the *Notebooks*.[20] Monk (1991:18) points out that it was his sister Gretl who directed Wittgenstein to Schopenhauer (that is, to *The World as Will and Representation*) after he had lost his religious faith while he was a schoolboy at Linz. According to Elizabeth Anscombe (1965: 11–12), Wittgenstein was sixteen years old when he read Schopenhauer, who "struck him as fundamentally right, if only a few adjustments and clarifications were made." Although there is no evidence that Wittgenstein reread Schopenhauer in 1916 (Schroeder 2012: 368), several entries from the *Notebooks* of that period make direct reference to Schopenhauer's philosophy. In this sense, Wittgenstein's later remarks on Schopenhauer's inability to attain real depth with his thinking ("One could call Schopenhauer a quite *crude* mind. I.e., he does have refinement, but at a certain level this suddenly comes to an end & he is as crude as the crudest. Where real depth starts, his finishes," he noted in 1939–1940; CV: 41e/Wittgenstein 1998b)[21] should thus not mislead: Schopenhauer exerted a major influence on the early Wittgenstein's understanding of the world and of ethics. It is therefore not surprising that his view of suicide from this period was also influenced by Schopenhauer, as McGuinness (1990: 157, 254) notes. Since Schopenhauer's influence on Wittgenstein's view of suicide will be scrutinized in the third section, I will here focus the attention on other sources. But before that, a caveat: the following analysis is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather illustrative of the way in which some authors shaped or influenced, directly or indirectly, the early Wittgenstein's view of suicide. If authors like Saint Augustine are not included, this is due to space limitations, not because I consider them to be unimportant for the analysis of Wittgenstein's view of suicide.

One of the first sources that come to mind when reading Wittgenstein's remarks on suicide is undoubtedly Dostoevsky. Indeed, the way in which Wittgenstein's most important text on suicide begins—"If suicide is allowed then everything is allowed" (NB 10.1.17/Wittgenstein 1998a)—clearly calls to mind the main idea of Dostoevsky's last novel *The Brothers Karamazov*—if God does not exist and there is no immortality of the soul, then everything is allowed. There is little doubt that Dostoevsky's novels fascinated Wittgenstein at least as much as Tolstoy's. In particular, Wittgenstein read *The Brothers Karamazov* so often that "he knew whole passages of it by heart, particularly the speeches of the elder Zossima" (Monk 1991:136). When he went to the front, one of the few things that he brought with him was a copy of *The Brothers Karamazov* (ibid.). Some years later, when he was a schoolteacher in Austria, he read this book "over and over again," and read it aloud to the village priest (Rhees 1984: 86).

Wittgenstein was also impressed by Dostoevsky's *Notes from the House of the Dead*, the semi-autobiographical novel which contains the writer's recollections of the years he had spent as a convict in a Siberia prison camp (1850–1854). As mentioned, Wittgenstein had gone through a similar experience when he was a prisoner of war in Cassino, although undoubtedly in less harsh and severe conditions. It is, therefore, not surprising that he liked the *Notes*, which portray the life of convicts.[22] It was precisely in Cassino that Wittgenstein used to read aloud, to his acquaintances Parak, Hänsel, Drobil, and Jungwirth, another Dostoevsky novel: *Crime and Punishment* (Parak 1992: 150). Several years later, when he

was learning Russian, this novel was his favourite reading and his copy had every single accent pencilled in (Rhees 1984: 21).

As Ilse Somavilla (2013: 263) points out, like Anzengruber, Dostoevsky "played a decisive role in Wittgenstein's attitude towards ethics and religion." Besides the explicit reference to the writer in an entry in the *Notebooks* dedicated to the happy life (NB 6.7.16), there are several aspects that can explain Wittgenstein's fascination with Dostoevsky. Among them, there is certainly Dostoevsky's peculiar attention to sinners and their redemption through the acceptance of suffering (recall Wittgenstein's view of himself as a sinful man and his recurrent attempts to free himself from sin). More in general, what Wittgenstein found in Dostoevsky's novels was a way of dealing with ethical and religious problems in real, lived life, "without extraneous equipment" (McGuinness 2013: 230) or "theories about an ethical conduct of life" (Somavilla 2013: 276). Indeed, as Evgenia Cherkasova (2009: 16–17) points out, "[f]or Dostoevsky, an ethical decision must be blessed by the heart; otherwise, it is a mere idea, however 'sensible', intellectually sophisticated, or aesthetically enticing it may be. He eloquently proves that heartless ideas are often a source of immorality: they bring with them destructiveness, hatred, cynicism, and misanthropy."

Suicide is one of the ways in which Dostoevsky shows the destructiveness of an idea or of a certain (usually, nihilistic or materialistic) worldview or attitude to life. The suicides of Svidrigailov (*Crime and Punishment*), Stavrogin (*Demons*), and Smerdjakov (*The Brothers Karamazov*) offer a clear example of this. As Shneidman (1984: 98) points out, "twenty-two successful suicides, as well as a number of attempted and contemplated acts of self-destruction, are depicted in Dostoevsky's works."[23] Of all these different kinds of suicide, Raskolnikov's contemplated suicide has a particular relevance in connection to Wittgenstein. Indeed, if both Wittgenstein's sister Hermine and Ludwig von Ficker likened Ludwig to Alyosha (the youngest of the Karamazov brothers, who enters the local monastery as a novice),[24] Wittgenstein's aforementioned claim to be "a born again" undoubtedly calls to mind Raskolnikov's spiritual rebirth.

Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* revolves around Raskolnikov's gradual regeneration. Sin (the murder of the moneylender and his sister) is followed by guilt, remorse, and the final redemption through suffering—thanks to Sonya, who urges Raskolnikov to confess and atone for his crime. Before confessing his crime to the police, however, Raskolnikov contemplates suicide as a possible way to put an end to his troubles. Nevertheless, a lack of courage, the fear of death, and the desire to live prevent him to commit suicide by throwing himself into the river.[25] The two letters sent by Wittgenstein to Paul Engelmann, dating from 30 May and 21 June 1920, describe a situation which in several regards (albeit with obvious differences) is analogous to that of Raskolnikov. Like Raskolnikov, Wittgenstein is in a very peculiar state of mind: "the state of *not being able to get over a particular fact*" (Engelmann 1967: 33). If Raskolnikov is unable to overcome the killing of the two women, in the case of Wittgenstein, we ignore what this particular fact precisely consists of, since he does not mention it in his letters. However, in the letter dated 30 May, he clarifies that his miserable and pitiable situation is a result of his own "baseness and rottenness" (ibid.). As a consequence of their inability to get over a fact, both Raskolnikov and Wittgenstein contemplate committing suicide. Nonetheless, none of them takes this step, for they both know that this act would not be a *real* solution of their respective problems. As he walks along the embankment of the canal, Raskolnikov considers suicide as a way out, but he then asks himself: "Is it a way out, though?" (Dostoevsky 1993: 170). Similarly, Wittgenstein confesses to Engelmann that he has continually thought of taking his own life, and that the idea still haunts him sometimes. Nonetheless, he adds: "there is only one remedy that I can see, and this is of course to come to terms with that fact" (Engelmann 1967: 33). As Wittgenstein recognizes, however, to come to terms with the fact would require faith. But faith is precisely something which both Raskolnikov and Wittgenstein lack.[26] Consequently, to use Wittgenstein's metaphor, they are like a man,

unable to swim, who "has fallen into the water and flails about with his hands and feet and feels that he *cannot* keep his head above water" (ibid.).

The thought that suicide is a false remedy is expressed, in an even more explicit way, in the following entry in the Koder diaries, dating from 7 November or December 1931: "Despair has no end & suicide does not end it, unless one puts an end to it by pulling oneself together" (Klagge and Nordmann 2002: 127).[27] As Martin Klebes (2015: 7) points out, the association between despair and suicide inevitably recalls Anti-Climacus' (one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms) *The Sickness unto Death*. Before we consider this book, however, a few words should be said on the profound influence that Kierkegaard had on Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein was most probably introduced to Kierkegaard's philosophy by his elder sister Gretl, who served, during childhood and adolescence, as his brother's philosophical mentor (Schönbaumsfeld 2007: 14). During the First World War, Hermine sent his brother a number of Kierkegaard volumes (McGuinness 2020: 38). These certainly exerted, together with other readings, a profound influence on him, since, as we know, after the war Russell found Wittgenstein profoundly changed: "he has become a complete mystic. He reads people like Kierkegaard and Angelus Silesius, and he seriously contemplates becoming a monk" (McGuinness 2008: 112). Kierkegaard's influence on Wittgenstein was long-lasting, as the aforementioned entry in the Koder diaries shows. During a conversation with Drury, Wittgenstein defined the Danish philosopher as "by far the most profound thinker of the last century" (Rhees 1984: 87), whereas to Malcolm he wrote that Kierkegaard was "far too deep" for him (Malcolm 2001: 106).[28]

It is safe to assume that Kierkegaard also shaped Wittgenstein's view of suicide. Although there is no direct evidence that Wittgenstein read *The Sickness unto Death* (Suzuki 2011: 470–471), still, as Genia Schönbaumsfeld (2007: 16) points out, the parallels between Anti-Climacus' and Wittgenstein's remarks on suicide are striking. Just as Wittgenstein defines suicide as "the elementary sin" (NB 10.1.17), so Anti-Climacus characterizes this act as "the most crucial sin," for spirit is mutinying against God (Kierkegaard 1980: 46). For Anti-Climacus, "suicide is despair" (*id.*: 48) and the only way to overcome it is to have faith, since "the opposite to being in despair is to have faith" (*id.*: 49). As we have seen, for Wittgenstein as well despair leads to suicide and, according to the metaphor mentioned earlier, the only way to avoid drowning is to have faith. But faith is precisely what Wittgenstein lacks, as he confesses to Engelmann, hence his failure to overcome his condition of despair. Besides these analogies, it is also noteworthy that, for Anti-Climacus, suicide is the greatest danger for "the person of inclosing reserve," someone who longs for solitude and retreats into silence. If in despair such a person "does not experience an upheaval that puts him on the right road to faith" (*id.*: 65), he runs the risk that despair might become intensified in a higher form. What saves such a man is the possibility of opening up to a confidant/e. In this case, he will presumably avoid suicide. It is undeniable that such psychological characterization of the person of inclosing reserve seems to fit perfectly not only Raskolnikov, who is saved by Sonya, but also Wittgenstein, who probably found in Engelmann a confidant, with whom he could open up.

Going back to Dostoevsky, it must be noted that the aforementioned analogy with Raskolnikov can be pushed even further. As already mentioned, Raskolnikov's spiritual regeneration is possible only because he eventually accepts to confess his crime to the police. This confession provides him with a chance of atoning for his sin and beginning a new, spiritual life: "Here begins a new account," Dostoevsky writes at the end of his novel, "the account of a man's gradual renewal, the account of his gradual regeneration, his gradual transition from one world to another, his acquaintance with a new, hitherto completely unknown reality" (Dostoevsky 1993: 551). For Wittgenstein as well confession had to be the turning point for a new life, as he clearly wrote in 1931: "A confession has to be part of one's new life" (CV: 16e). According to McGuinness (1990: 274), already around the time he was in Cassino Wittgenstein dwelt "on the importance of acknowledging one's sin." However, it

was not until Christmas 1936 and New Year 1937 that Wittgenstein took courage and made his confession.[29]

Spiritual regeneration is a central topic of another book that, as we have seen, proved beneficial to Wittgenstein, namely William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.[30] As mentioned, Wittgenstein discovered this book in 1912 and wrote to Russell that reading it did him "a *lot* of good" and helped him "to get rid of the *Sorge* (in the sense in which Goethe used the word in the 2nd part of Faust)"[31] (McGuinness 2008: 30). We have already seen how, before the First World War, Wittgenstein was often depressed and anxious, and felt suicidal. To understand how James' book helped him to get rid of the *Sorge*, it is necessary to introduce one of the central distinctions of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, namely that between the religion of the healthy-mindedness and the religion of what James calls "the sick soul." The former religion mirrors the temperament of the healthy-minded, who tend to see things optimistically and to minimize the evil aspects of human existence. In contrast, the sick souls are persuaded that "evil is an essential part of our being and the key to the interpretation of our life" (James 1985: 131). In some instances, this pessimistic worldview can be so extreme as to lead the person who holds it to become prey of a pathological melancholy. Among many kinds of pathological depressions, James focuses particular attention on *anhedonia*,[32] which consists in a condition of "mere passive joylessness and dreariness, discouragement, dejection, lack of taste and zest and spring" (*id.*: 145).

In order to illustrate the condition of anhedonia and its consequences (from a religious point of view) on the individual, James mentions the case of Tolstoy. At about the age of fifty, after the publication of his two masterpieces *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1877), Tolstoy underwent a profound moral and spiritual crisis that led him to despair. He was loved, rich, and famous, but life had become suddenly meaningless and purposeless. As he relates in his book *Confession* (1882), some extracts of which are quoted at length by James, Tolstoy thought of taking his life: he hid the rope in order not to hang himself and stopped going shooting in order not to yield to the temptation of put an end to himself with his gun.[33] "Suicide was naturally the consistent course dictated by the logical intellect," James remarks (*id.*: 156). Then, something unexpected happened. A consciousness of life drew him out of his situation of despair and a thirst for God led him to a religious conversion:

> I was saved from suicide. Just how or when the change took place I cannot tell. But as insensibly and gradually as the force of life had been annulled within me, and I had reached my moral death-bed, just as gradually and imperceptibly did the energy of life come back. And what was strange was that this energy that came back was nothing new. It was my ancient juvenile force of faith, the belief that the sole purpose of my life was to be *better*. I gave up the life of the conventional world, recognizing it to be no life, but a parody on life, which its superfluities simply keep us from comprehending. (*id.*: 185)

As Tolstoy explains in the *Preface* to *The Gospel in Brief* (Tolstoy 2011: xxi-xxii), it was the study of the Gospels that saved his life—just like Tolstoy's *The Gospel in Brief* virtually kept Wittgenstein alive in 1914. Indeed, Tolstoy (and Wittgenstein too, through Tolstoy) understood that "he had been living wrongly and must change," as James (1985: 185) puts it. A spiritual rebirth thus took place: a false life based on "conventionality, artificiality, and personal ambition" (ibid.) was replaced by a real and true life based on spirituality, asceticism, and faith. This spiritual regeneration is taken by James, among other examples, to be representative of the twice-born religion: "the personality is changed, the man *is* born anew" (*id.*: 241). The result is what James calls sanctification or saintliness, "the ripe fruits of religion in a character" (*id.*: 271), a condition characterized by four main features, from which derive four practical consequences: asceticism, strength of soul, purity, and charity.

Note that James does not only describe saintliness but also prescribes it: “Let us be saints, then, if we can, whether or not we succeed visibly and temporally”[34] (James 1985: 377). According to Sanfélix Vidarte (2007: 84), “it is abundantly clear that, from 1913 onwards, Wittgenstein began to orientate his life following this ideal of saintliness.”[35]

It is noteworthy that the same, high ethical standard was set by Weininger in his *Sex and Character*—another book that, as mentioned, exerted a strong influence on Wittgenstein, particularly on the *Tractatus*.[36] Weininger, who defends an ethical individualism based on Kant’s moral philosophy, claims that man has only duties to oneself and that, in respecting these duties, he must be categorical. To him, duty is “*the meaning of the universe*” (Weininger 2005: 142). Weininger also postulates the unity of logic and ethics,[37] and defends solipsism—two aspects that clearly influenced the early Wittgenstein. From the unity of logic and ethics, Weininger derives his ideal of perfection, which consists in the union of virtue and insight, holiness (or saintliness[38]) and wisdom. It is not difficult to see how appealing this ideal was to Wittgenstein, who combined a strong sense of duty with a constant pursuing of wisdom. Solipsism, on the other hand, lies at the heart of Weininger’s refutation of suicide. Invoking Schopenhauer’s opening sentence of *The World as Will and Representation* “the world is my representation” (WWR I: 23/Schopenhauer 2010),[39] Weininger defends solipsism from a theoretical point of view but denies the existence of a practical solipsism. In fact, according to him, “*only a man who feels that the other is also a self, a monad, a center of the world in his own right […] will be automatically immune to using his fellow-human merely as a means to an end*” (Weininger 2005: 156). Theoretical individualism (this is the expression used by Weininger) is, thus, “*the psychological prerequisite of any practical altruism*. […] [T]here is no such thing as *practical solipsism*” (ibid.). From this follows an important consequence for Weininger’s view of suicide. Indeed, if “*‘I’ and ‘thou’ are reciprocal terms*” (*id.*: 157), that is, if the highest point of individualism coincides with the highest point of universalism, then “he who kills himself kills the whole world at the same time; and he who murders another commits the worst crime because he has murdered himself in the other” (ibid.). An echo of these hard words against suicide resounds in the aforementioned letter of 21 June 1920 to Engelmann, where Wittgenstein defines suicide as a *Schweinerei*: “I know that to kill oneself is always a dirty thing to do” (Engelmann 1967: 33).

There is a certain tragic irony in the fact that, notwithstanding his strong condemnation of suicide, Weininger ended up taking his life at a very young age. Some months before his death, during his visit to Italy, he wrote the following note: “Suicide is not a sign of courage, but of cowardice, even if it is the least of the cowardly acts” (Weininger 2001: 157). Commenting on this, Steven Burns notes the following: “Wittgenstein seems to have feared his own cowardice during much of his life. And while that thought did not save Weininger from his fate, it may well have helped Wittgenstein through some dark periods” (Burns 2004: 97).

5.2 Wittgenstein’s View of Ethics

Although there is a clear disproportion in the *Tractatus* between the sections dedicated to logic and the final sections dedicated to ethics, the mystical, and the value and the sense of the world (TLP 6.4 to 7), scholars do not any longer consider the last part of this work as a heterogeneous body or a mere appendix. A well-known and oft-quoted letter sent to Ludwig von Ficker, the editor of the journal *Der Brenner*, clearly shows that Wittgenstein considered the last part of his work, the one devoted to what cannot be said, the most important one. The letter was sent in 1919. Hoping to get the *Tractatus* published in the journal edited by von Ficker, Wittgenstein explained that

> *[t]he book’s point is an ethical one*. I once meant to include in the preface a sentence which is not in fact there now, but which I will write out for you here, because it will

> perhaps be a key to the work for you. What I meant to write, then, was this: My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. *And it is precisely this second part that is the important one*. My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the ONLY rigorous way of drawing those limits. (Janik and Toulmin 1973: 192)

Furthermore, another letter dating from the same year shows that the main point of the *Tractatus* was the distinction between what can and what cannot be meaningfully said, but only shown. Having received the manuscript of the book, Russell read it "twice carefully" and sent a letter to Wittgenstein on 13 August 1919, focusing the attention exclusively on logical problems and telling him that he was convinced that Wittgenstein was right in his main contention, namely "that logical props are tautologies, which are not true in the sense that substantial props are true" (McGuinness 2008: 96). Wittgenstein's answer, some days later, was lapidary. Russell had completely missed the main point of his book:

> Now I'm afraid you haven't really got hold of my main contention, to which the whole business of logical prop[osition]s is only a corollary. The main point is the theory of what can be expressed (gesagt) by prop[osition]s—i.e. by language—(and, which comes to the same, what can be *thought*) and what can not be expressed by prop[osition]s, but only shown (gezeigt); which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy. (McGuinness 2008: 98)

The *Preface* to the *Tractatus* confirms what Wittgenstein writes in both letters: the aim of the book is to draw a limit to the expression of thoughts, that is, to what can be meaningfully said. What lies on the other side of the limit is simply nonsense and, therefore, must be passed over in silence. For reasons that will be explained, according to Wittgenstein, ethical propositions are nonsensical. Paradoxically, however, as the letter to von Ficker shows, it is precisely this nonsense, which cannot be put into words but can be only shown, that constitutes the most important and valuable part not only of the *Tractatus* but also of human existence. Given that Wittgenstein attached such importance to the distinction between what can and cannot be meaningfully said—as shown, he considered this to be the cardinal problem of philosophy –, I will begin my overview of Wittgenstein's conception of ethics by elucidating this distinction.

As Cyrill Barrett (1991: 3) points out, "the *Tractatus* came into being as a result of Wittgenstein's attempt to find a satisfactory explanation of how elementary propositions signify." The solution was the *picture theory of the proposition*. Apparently, this solution occurred to Wittgenstein in 1914, while he was reading in a magazine a report about a lawsuit in Paris concerning a car accident.[40] At the trial, a model of the accident was presented before the court. It occurred to Wittgenstein that the miniature model could represent the accident owing to the correspondence between its parts and things in reality. Wittgenstein also understood that the same analogy applied to the relation between language and the world: a proposition serves as a picture (*Bild*), a model of reality (TLP 4.01), by virtue of the correspondence between its parts and the state of affairs it depicts. As Wittgenstein explains in the *Tractatus*, this correspondence is possible because the picture that we make of reality and reality itself are isomorphic, that is, they share the same logical form (TLP 2.18). As Wittgenstein puts it, "[a] picture has logico-pictorial form in common with what it depicts" (TLP 2.2).

For Wittgenstein, "a proposition is a description of a state of affairs" (TLP 4.023). Thus, someone who understands the sense of a specific proposition knows what is the case (that is, which state of affairs exists) if the same proposition is true and what is not the case (that is, which state of affairs does not exist) if it is false. This means that to understand the sense of a proposition one does not necessarily know whether the same proposition is true or false (TLP 4.024). On the other hand, to ascertain the truth-value of a proposition, that is, to know whether a proposition is true or false, one must compare it with reality (TLP 4.05;

2.223). In Wittgenstein's words, "[if] an elementary proposition is true, the state of affairs exists: if an elementary proposition is false, the state of affairs does not exist" (TLP 4.25). It is impossible to know from the proposition alone whether it is true or false: for Wittgenstein, there is no a priori truth (TLP 2.224, 2.225; 3.04, 3.05; 6.113).

Based on these (among other) assumptions, Wittgenstein draws a clear distinction between different kinds of propositions. The propositions of natural science describe what the case is, that is, the facts, which are existent states of affairs (TLP 2). If the totality of true propositions describes the world, which is the totality of facts (TLP 1.1), that is, the totality of existing states of affairs (TLP 2.04), then the whole of natural science is the totality of true propositions (TLP 4.11). Being statements of contingent, empirical facts, the propositions of natural science are genuine, meaningful propositions (they can be true or false). Accordingly, they are identified by Wittgenstein with what can be said (TLP 6.53). Most of the propositions of philosophy, on the contrary, are pseudo-propositions: they are not false, but rather nonsensical (*unsinnig*). These propositions arise from an essential failure to understand the logic of our language (TLP 4.003; *Preface*). According to Wittgenstein, philosophers have traditionally tried to say the unsayable, that is, what cannot be said, but only shown. By so doing, they have fallen in nonsense: whenever they tried to say something metaphysical, they failed to give a meaning to certain signs in their propositions (TLP 6.53). Consequently, the essence and nature of philosophy must be reconceived: its aim should be the logical clarification and elucidation of thoughts and propositions. As Wittgenstein puts it, "philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity. […] Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries" (TLP 4.112).

Like propositions of philosophy, propositions of logic are not genuine, but rather pseudo-propositions. Like (most of) the former, the latter tell us nothing about the world: they are not pictures of reality, that is, they are both irrefutable and unconfirmable by any possible experience (TLP 6.1222). Despite this similarity, propositions of logic do not belong to the same category of propositions of philosophy. In fact, the former have "a unique status among all propositions" (TLP 6.112): they are tautologies (TLP 6.1), which lack true–false poles. In logic nothing is accidental (TLP 2.012), nothing is merely possible: "logic deals with every possibility" (TLP 2.0121). Thus, propositions of logic are not nonsensical, like propositions of philosophy, but rather senseless (*sinnlos*), that is, they say nothing (TLP 5.43, 6.11). What these propositions do is to describe or rather represent the scaffolding of the world (TLP 6.124). In other words, logic mirrors the world (TLP 5.511). Logic is, thus, a priori (TLP 5.4731) and transcendental (TLP 6.13): "the limits of the world are also its limits" (TLP 5.61).

Given this distinction between genuine, nonsensical, and senseless propositions (respectively, the propositions of natural science, philosophy, and logic), where does Wittgenstein locate the propositions of ethics? Like logic, ethics (as well as aesthetics and religion) is transcendental (TLP 6.421, NB 30.7.16). As Barrett (1991: 30) points out, however, "the transcendentality of ethical, aesthetic and religious expression is not identical with that of logic and mathematics. They do not mirror the structure of the world. They treat the world as a whole: they transcend the facts of the world." The key to understanding Wittgenstein's view of ethics is his claim that "if there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental" (TLP 6.41). As mentioned, for Wittgenstein, the world is the totality of facts (TLP 1.1), that is, the totality of existing states of affairs (TLP 2.04). That a state of affair *x* exists rather than the state of affair *y* is purely accidental. According to Wittgenstein, this applies to all the states of affairs that constitute the world. Value, on the contrary, is not contingent, but necessary. Indeed, as Wittgenstein explains in the *Lecture on Ethics*, ethical judgements are judgements of absolute, not relative value.[41] Therefore, value cannot be found in the world (for all that exists in the world is contingent and accidental), but must lie outside it.

An example from the *Lecture on Ethics* helps clarify Wittgenstein's view. Suppose an omniscient person wrote a big book, which contained the whole description of the world. If we read in this book the description of a murder, we would only find empirical facts, that is, physical and psychological facts, for instance, "*a* stabs *b*," "the knife is 10 cm long," "it is 7:05 pm," "*a* is *b*'s ex-lover," "*a* is jealous," and so on. The complete description of this murder would not contain any ethical proposition, for, as already mentioned, value—in this case, ethical value—is not a fact in the world, but lies outside it. In this sense, as Wittgenstein explains, there would be absolutely no difference between the same murder and any other physical event, for instance, the falling of a stone. Obviously, the falling of a stone might be perceived as a neutral event by an observer, whereas a murder might provoke feelings of pain, rage, and contempt. However, these feelings would be psychological facts, "but no Ethics" (LE: 7/Wittgenstein 1965).

The consequence that Wittgenstein draws from his locating ethical value outside the world is that "it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics" (TLP 6.42). This does not obviously mean that propositions of ethics are not verbally expressed every day in the world, but rather that propositions of ethics are not genuine propositions. They are nonsensical, like the propositions of philosophy. Indeed, according to Wittgenstein, our words are capable only of conveying natural meaning and sense: they can only meaningfully express facts. Ethics, on the contrary, is supernatural: it transcends the world; it lies beyond its limits. Therefore, every time we try to write or talk Ethics (or Religion, or Aesthetics), we hopelessly run against the boundaries of language. As Wittgenstein puts it in the *Tractatus*, "ethics cannot be put into words" (TLP 6.421; NB 30.7.16).[42]

One of the most important (if not the most important) consequences of the fact that ethics cannot be said is that any attempt to formulate and justify ethical principles, rules, and laws, according to which we could regulate our moral conduct, is doomed to result in nonsense. This is precisely the reason for which, in one of the conversations with the members of the Vienna Circle, Wittgenstein criticizes Schlick (the founder of the Circle) for considering the rationalist approach to theological ethics (God wants the good because it is good) as profounder than the voluntarist approach (good is good because it is what God wants). According to Wittgenstein, the case is the other way round. For the latter approach "cuts off the way to any explanation 'why' it is good," whereas the former approach "proceeds 'as if' you could give reasons for what is good" (Waismann 1979: 115). Reasons for what is good are precisely what cannot be given, for as mentioned, ethics is transcendental: it cannot be taught or explained, it cannot be justified or articulated. As Anne-Marie Christensen (2004: 125) points out, "as far as the ethical goes the individual *alone* is responsible for its actions."

If the world is in itself neither good nor evil, and if good and evil are not properties of the world, as Wittgenstein writes in his *Notebooks* (NB 2.8.16), one might think that ethics have no connection whatsoever with the world. However, this is not the case. In fact, according to Wittgenstein, good and evil enter the world through the subject, although the subject is not a part of the world but a boundary of it. Here, Wittgenstein conceives the subject in Schopenhauerian terms, as a presupposition of the existence of the world. Just like Schopenhauer opens *The World as Will and Representation* by claiming that "the world is my representation" (WWR I: 23), so Wittgenstein, adopting a solipsist view, writes in the *Tractatus* that "the world is my world" (TLP 5.62). According to Wittgenstein, it is precisely the fact that the world is my world that makes it possible to talk about a subject. However, this subject is neither the thinking subject (TLP 5.631, NB 5.8.16) nor the psychological (individual and empirical) subject (TLP 5.641, NB 11.8.16), for the I is not an object among others which I can make experience of. Just like the eye is not a part of the visual field, so the subject is not a part of the world but rather the limit of it (TLP 5.632). It is for this reason that Wittgenstein defines it as metaphysical—for the subject stands, in a transcendental sense, at the boundaries of the world.

Good and bad are not ethical attributes of the world but of the willing subject. The will is thus the bearer (*Träger*) of the ethical (TLP 6.423, NB 21.7.16). This means that for Wittgenstein an action is in itself neither (morally) good nor bad (as we have seen, value lies outside the sphere of what happens). Good or bad is uniquely the will of the person that decides to bring about the action. An action can be thus described as good or bad only in relation to the ethical will that is connected with it.[43] Wittgenstein does not give any definition of what a good or a bad will is (in TLP 6.423, he says that "it is impossible to speak about the will in so far as it is the subject of ethical attributes") but writes instead that "if the good or bad exercise of the will does alter the world, it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts" (TLP 6.43). This is in agreement with what we saw earlier, namely that the subject is not a part of the world but a boundary of it. The effect of the good or bad exercise of the will, Wittgenstein continues, is that the world "becomes an altogether different world. It must, so to speak, wax and wane as a whole" (ibid.).

In order to understand the meaning of this passage, consider the aforementioned case of Raskolnikov, the main character of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Before killing the moneylender, Raskolnikov thinks about the possibility of murder for several weeks. He elaborates a theory that is supposed to provide him with a moral justification for the crime: he is convinced that he belongs to the category of the extraordinary men and that he can shed human blood "*in all conscience*" (Dostoevsky 1993: 263). As soon as he kills the old lady and her sister, however, everything changes. Raskolnikov finds himself in a delirious and feverish state. He is confused and paranoiac and, what is most important, he is disgusted by what he has done. His moral justification disintegrates completely as he feels overwhelmed by guilt and becomes conscious of the real consequences of his deed. He has shed human blood and is now a *murderer*. His world has changed, has become different or, to use Wittgenstein's words, has waned as a whole—at least, until the moment in which, urged by Sonya, he decides to confess and atone for his crime. By making his confession and accepting the status of sinner, Raskolnikov paves the way for his later spiritual and moral rebirth. From that moment, his world begins to change back again. What is important to note is that, in both cases, nothing changes *in* the world—in fact, the facts remain unchanged. What changes is Raskolnikov's attitude *to* the world, that is, the way in which he views the world.

Good will is linked to happiness. At the end of section 6.43, Wittgenstein establishes the following analogy: just like someone with a good will views the world in a completely different way than someone with a bad will, so "the world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man" (TLP 6.43). To understand the reason of this analogy it is necessary to understand who is, according to Wittgenstein, the happy man. However, to understand Wittgenstein's conception of the happy life, it is necessary to understand his view of causal necessity. Consistently with the aforementioned claim that "all that happens and is the case is accidental" (TLP 6.41), Wittgenstein rejects causal necessity. According to him, "there is no compulsion making one thing happen because another has happened. The only necessity that exists is *logical* necessity" (TLP 6.37). The procedure of induction, which should be justified by causal necessity, has no logical justification, only a psychological one: "there are no grounds for believing that the simplest eventuality will in fact be realized" (TLP 6.3631). Just as Hume examines, in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, the idea of necessary connection in relation to both the external and the internal senses,[44] so Wittgenstein rejects the idea of causal necessity by making reference both to physical phenomena (following Hume, in TLP 6.36311, he claims that we can only hypothesize, but never know that the sun will rise tomorrow[45]) and human volition. Unlike Hume, however, Wittgenstein combines epistemological considerations concerning the will with ethical and mystical thoughts, as the *Notebooks* show.

According to Wittgenstein, I cannot control the happenings of the world; nor can I bend them to my will: "the world is independent of my will" (TLP 6.373). This claim is justified by the fact that "there is no *logical* connection between the will and the world" (TLP 6.374),

which would guarantee that all that we wish for must necessarily happen (as mentioned earlier, logical necessity is the only necessity that Wittgenstein acknowledges). Given this powerless condition over the happenings of the world, for Wittgenstein the first step to happiness (and wisdom, for the life of knowledge is the happy life; NB 13.8.16) is to recognize that we are helpless against the miseries of the world and, at the same time, that we are (apparently) dependent on an alien will, namely God's. What should follow from this is the adoption of an ethical attitude that, although reminiscent of the Stoics' and Schopenhauer's philosophy, was strongly influenced by Wittgenstein's reading of Tolstoy's *The Gospel in Brief* (as well as by Anzengruber and Dostoevsky). This ethical attitude essentially consists in the following: making oneself independent of the world by renouncing any attempt to master it; committing oneself to the life of knowledge; accepting that one is dependent on God's will; renouncing the amenities of the world, which should be considered as "graces of fate"; living in the present and not fearing death. Accordingly, the happy man is he "who no longer needs to have any purpose except to live" (NB 6.7.16), whereas the happy life is a life lived in agreement with the world. Here, the ethical or good life and the happy life coincide: such a life is possible only when the world is seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. (NB 7.10.16), that is, as a limited whole (TLP 6.45).[46]

5.3 Wittgenstein's Remarks on Suicide

As already mentioned, Wittgenstein's considerations on suicide are essentially reduced to three sources: an entry in the *Notebooks*, dating from 1917; two letters to his friend Paul Engelmann, written in 1920; and the aforementioned entry in the Koder Diaries, written in 1931. Of the three sources, the entry in the *Notebooks* is unquestionably the most important one. It is, therefore, unsurprising that most scholars have mainly focused attention on it. However, considering that only three years separate the entry from the two letters sent to Engelmann, and given that these provide valuable information on Wittgenstein's view of suicide, it is possible to read them in conjunction with the entry from the *Notebooks*. The passage from the Koder diaries, on the contrary, chronologically stands apart. Nonetheless, as we have seen, this entry contains a thought that Wittgenstein had already expressed, although in different form, in the second letter to Engelmann.

The entry in the *Notebooks* was written on 10 January 1917. At the time, Wittgenstein had spent Christmas in Vienna with his family and then left his hometown on 6 January.[47] He was active on service again starting from 19 January.[48] It is, therefore, reasonable to suppose that the following entry was written while on the way to the front:

> If suicide is allowed then everything is allowed.
> If anything is not allowed then suicide is not allowed.
> This throws a light on the nature of ethics, for suicide is, so to speak, the elementary sin.
> And when one investigates it, it is like investigating mercury vapour in order to comprehend the nature of vapours.
> Or is even suicide in itself neither good nor evil? (NB 10.1.17)

The enigmatic nature of this passage leaves the reader disoriented. Several questions emerge: why should everything be allowed, if suicide is allowed? Conversely, if anything is not allowed, why should suicide not be allowed? In other words, what makes suicide so peculiar and different from all the other morally relevant acts? And why and how should this peculiarity throw a light on the nature of ethics? Finally, how should the last sentence be interpreted? Is Wittgenstein calling into question his own argument? Is he, after all, putting forward an argument? Indeed, we should not forget that this is a private note that was not meant for publication. On the other hand, however, it would be wrong to dismiss this entry as a *mere* posthumous note. We know that suicide was for Wittgenstein an intensely personal matter and it is safe to assume that he had given much thought to this phenomenon.

As already mentioned, the way in which the first two sentences of Wittgenstein's note are formulated clearly calls to mind the main idea of Dostoevsky's last novel *The Brothers Karamazov*—if God does not exist and if there is no immortality of the soul, then everything is permitted.[49] This idea is conceived by Ivan, one of the three Karamazov brothers, and provides Smerdyakov (the fourth, illegitimate brother) with the moral justification for the parricide. Although often (wrongly) quoted as "If God does not exist, everything is permitted", the thought finds different formulations in the novel,[50] the main idea defended by Dostoevsky being that the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are the two essential pillars of morality. Without them, there are no longer any moral constraints on man's action; thus, everything is permitted.

Whereas it is relatively easy to grasp the logic behind Ivan's idea (in Christian theology, God is traditionally conceived as the foundation of morality. Without Him, it might be argued, there are no limits to man's will. Therefore, everything is permitted[51]), it is more complicated to understand why from the fact that suicide is allowed it should follow that everything is allowed. Indeed, *taken literally*, this argument would imply that "if it is allowed to take one's life, then it is allowed to murder, to torture, to rape, to deceive, etc." (Wittwer 2003: 369). Needless to say, the transition from the premise "suicide is allowed" to the conclusion "everything is allowed" is not self-evident. Many persons consider that, at least in certain cases, suicide is morally allowed, but they are far from thinking that murder, rape, torture, and other practices like these are morally allowed. Obviously, the same critique can be addressed to Dostoevsky's argument: why should it follow from the fact that God does not exist and that there is no immortality of the soul that everything is permitted? There are many atheists who do not believe either in God or in the immortality of the soul. However, they do not go around arbitrarily killing or raping people.

It might be argued that, from a logical point of view, Dostoevsky's (via Ivan) argument is a *non sequitur*: the conclusion does not follow from the premise. However, the problem of this approach is that, as much as this critique might be right, it completely misses the point of the novel. For Dostoevsky's aim with *The Brothers Karamazov* was certainly not that of proving *by way of logic* that if God does not exist and if there is no immortality of the soul, then everything is permitted (indeed, the whole novel revolves around the conflict between reason and logic, on the one hand, and faith and love, on the other). Héctor Wittwer similarly points out that, if taken literally, Wittgenstein's argument suffers from some logical inconsistencies (*id.*: 372–374). It is, however, very unlikely, Wittwer argues, that one of the fathers of modern logic was unable to detect such flaws. Beyond the question of whether Wittgenstein's argument suffers or not from logical inconsistencies, Wittwer is certainly right in pointing out that, in order to understand its meaning, Wittgenstein's note must be read in a different way, namely on the background of his peculiar conception of the happy life.

As we have seen in the previous section, what follows from the acknowledgement that we have no control over the happenings of the world is an ethical attitude that should lead, among other things, to live in the present and not fear death. As mentioned, Wittgenstein drew this idea especially (although not uniquely[52]) from his reading of Tolstoy's *The Gospel in Brief*. An early entry in the secret diaries shows how strong was the influence that the Russian writer exerted on him: "In my mind, I keep telling myself Tolstoy's words: 'Man is *powerless* in the flesh but *free* through the spirit'" (GT 12.9.14). The key to Tolstoy's reading of the Gospel is his interpretation of the kingdom of God, preached by Jesus, as something that is not in a time or in any place but within every person. To enter this kingdom, one must cease to worry about the future and live for the present day, in union with God. This union is possible only if one lives in the spirit and thus leads a true life. A life lived by the flesh is, on the contrary, a false life. Once true life is achieved, one is delivered from death and lives forever, outside of time and in an eternal present. For true life, there is no death.

The similarities with the early Wittgenstein are evident. “Eternal life belongs to those who live in the present,” Wittgenstein writes in the *Tractatus* (TLP 6.4311). Eternity is thus conceived not as infinite temporal duration but as timelessness (*Unzeitlichkeit*). Wittgenstein expands on this idea in the *Notebooks*. Happy is he who lives in the eternal present, not in time. For him, there is no death—or, put differently, death ceases to be something he is afraid of. Conversely, “fear in face of death is the best sign of a false, i.e. bad, life” (NB 8.7.16). From this view, a clear ethical imperative follows: “live happy!” (ibid.; NB 29.7.16), that is, in agreement and harmony with the world. Only then one is able to overcome the fear of death. What is more, a good life leads to a good, blessed death. Like Nietzsche, Wittgenstein establishes a clear parallelism between the way one lives and the way one dies.[53] We find traces of this idea in the secret diaries, as well as in a later entry from 17 February 1937: “The horrible instant in an unblessed death must be the thought: ‘Oh if only I had … Now it’s too late.’ Oh if only I had lived right! And the blessed instant must be: ‘Now it is accomplished!’” (Klagge and Nordmann 2002: 185).

As Barrett (1991: 57) points out, the suicide represents the opposite of the happy man. If the happy man lives in the present, no longer fears death and has made himself independent of the world, the suicide, on the contrary, is a man who is still dependent on the happenings of the world and attached to its amenities. He has not ceased to will and is an unhappy person because his wants do not attain fulfilment. Such a person still lives in time and in disagreement or disharmony with the world. In other words, the suicide “has withdrawn from the ethical situation as Wittgenstein understands it” (ibid.). In this sense, suicide is the elementary sin because “it constitutes an absolute rejection of the very [ethical] task that life presents us with. It is a refusal to accept our fate” (Stokhof 2002: 218). But why should this refusal be precisely a *sin* (*Sünde*), that is, an offence against God? In Wittgenstein’s view, this is because by committing suicide we are “mutinying against God,” to use Kierkegaard’s expression (Kierkegaard 1980: 46), instead of doing His will. We are expressing our dissatisfaction with how things stand. But “how things stand, is God. God is, how things stand” (NB 1.8.16). So that in rejecting the world (how things stand), we also reject God and his Will. Furthermore, by taking our life, we indirectly call into question the goodness of God’s will, for “to believe in a God means to understand the question about the meaning of life. To believe in a God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter. To believe in a God means to see that life has a meaning” (NB 8.7.16).

Besides the religious connotation of suicide as a sin, there is little doubt that Wittgenstein’s view of this act shares many similarities with Schopenhauer’s. This should not be surprising. Indeed, as already mentioned, Schopenhauer had a major influence on the early Wittgenstein’s worldview and understanding of ethics, as the *Notebooks* abundantly show. As we have seen in Chap. 2 of this book, according to Schopenhauer, “the person who commits suicide wills life, and is only unsatisfied with the conditions under which life has been given to him” (WWR I: 425). Analogously, the suicide is for Wittgenstein someone who is still attached to the comforts of the world and is unwilling to forgo them. Furthermore, Schopenhauer considers suicide as a false solution to one’s problems. Indeed, by committing suicide, one only destroys the single phenomenon but leaves untouched the thing in itself. Schopenhauer thus compares the suicide to a sick person who prefers to stay sick rather than be cured by undergoing a painful operation. Similarly, as mentioned, Wittgenstein considers suicide as a false remedy to one’s despair. The only real remedy is to detach oneself from the happenings of the world (which are independent of one’s will), to renounce the amenities of the world, and to cease willing.

In a recent paper, Gómez Alonso has provided a thorough analysis of the influence that Schopenhauer exerted on the early Wittgenstein. According to Gómez Alonso (2018: 299), “the meaning of Wittgenstein’s remarks on suicide should be elucidated against the background of the transcendental picture that permeates Wittgenstein’s early writings. This picture is, in its essentials, Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of the Will.” Gómez Alonso is certainly right in stressing the influence of Schopenhauer on Wittgenstein’s remarks on

suicide, although, as I tried to show, authors like James, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, and Weininger also contributed to an important extent to shape Wittgenstein's view of suicide. Besides, beyond the several and undeniable similarities that link Schopenhauer's and Wittgenstein's account, a number of important differences between the two views can be observed on closer scrutiny (some of which are stressed by Gómez Alonso himself). Focusing the attention on these differences will give us the occasion to reach a better understanding of Wittgenstein's remarks on suicide.[54]

From a general point of view, it must be noted that both Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein consider suicide from a higher standpoint than that of the empirical practical ethics. Indeed, just like Schopenhauer's objections against this act are of a metaphysical nature, Wittgenstein conceives suicide "as a *metaphysical problem* related to the 'wax or wane' […] of the world as a whole. Which means that Wittgenstein's objection to suicide is *not* moral, at least in the usual sense of the world" (Gómez Alonso 2018: 302). This undeniable similarity should not, however, conceal an important difference between the two approaches. Indeed, whereas Wittgenstein considers suicide *only* from the higher, metaphysical standpoint (as Gómez Alonso (ibid.) puts it, "phenomenal considerations are simply excluded from the *transcendental* position that Wittgenstein adopts"), Schopenhauer approaches suicide from *both* the perspective of the usual empirical practical ethics (above all, in his essay *On Suicide*, from the second volume of *Parerga and Paralipomena*) and the perspective of the metaphysical, higher ethics. Considered from the standpoint of the empirical practical ethics, for Schopenhauer suicide is not morally objectionable: no moral duty is violated by self-killing and there is no moral reason for which this act should be prohibited.[55] As Schopenhauer puts it, if we descend from the higher, ethical standpoint, "there is no longer a tenable moral reason to condemn suicide" (PP II: 279/Schopenhauer 2015). On the contrary, considered from the "higher" standpoint of the metaphysical ethics, suicide is a vain and foolish act, for it leaves the thing in itself untouched.

Another important similarity between Schopenhauer's and Wittgenstein's approach is constituted by the fact that they both condemn suicide for constituting an essential failure, on the part of the suicide, to comply with the ethical ideal (which is the negation of the will through asceticism, for Schopenhauer, and the achievement of a happy life in agreement with the world, for Wittgenstein). However, whereas for Schopenhauer self-preservation is not morally obligatory, but rather morally supererogatory (that is, suicide is not morally prohibited but rather condemned for standing in the path of the attainment of the moral ideal), for Wittgenstein suicide is the elementary sin, that is, the fundamental ethical failure. This different consideration of suicide is patent in the almost divergent attitude that Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein have towards suicide. Whereas the former has mostly a compassionate attitude and looks with a benevolent eye upon those who committed suicide (in his essay *On Suicide*, Schopenhauer (*id.*: 276) dismisses as "absurdities" the opinions, according to which suicide would be "the greatest cowardice," "only possible in madness," "wrong," etc.), the tone of the latter is rather reminiscent of Kant's: suicide is always a *Schweinerei*, "a dirty thing to do" (Engelmann 1967: 33). It is, therefore, no surprise that the German word used by Wittgenstein for suicide (not only in the letter to Engelmann, but also in the entry in the *Notebooks* and from the Koder diaries) is *Selbstmord*, a word that, as we have seen, is not neutral, for it lays emphasis on the fact that the one who is taking his or her own life is committing a crime [*Mord*].

Wittgenstein's definition of suicide as "the elementary sin" points towards another important difference between his and Schopenhauer's view of suicide. For the early Wittgenstein, ethics and religion are strictly connected together. When in the *Lecture on Ethics* Wittgenstein tries to explain what he means by absolute or ethical value, he mentions three, mystical experiences, which he translates in religious terms.[56] Having provided an analysis of these expressions, he then concludes that ethical and religious expressions share the same fundamental characteristic—nonsensicality—which constitutes their very essence. This strict connection between ethics and religion is mirrored in Wittgenstein's view of

suicide. As we have seen, living the right way involves, among other things, acceptance of God's will. Suicide, on the contrary, constitutes not only an ethical failure but also a mutiny against God (it is not a sin amongst others, it is the *elementary* sin).

Unlike Wittgenstein's, Schopenhauer's view of suicide is completely separated from religious considerations. For the latter, there are no valid religious grounds against suicide, only ethical–metaphysical. Whenever religious arguments are brought to consideration, they are harshly criticized by Schopenhauer.[57] In *On Suicide*, the clergy's zeal in condemning suicide (unsupported, according to Schopenhauer, neither by the Bible nor by valid arguments) is explained by the fact that the suicide indirectly calls into question the goodness of the world created by God—goodness expressly stated in the *Genesis'* formula *panta kala lian* (everything [was] very good).[58] As we have seen, Wittgenstein condemns suicide precisely for similar reasons. Schopenhauer, on the contrary, rejects the optimistic worldview of the *Genesis*, which clearly runs counter "the loudly screaming testimony of an entire world filled with misery" (WWR II: 595/Schopenhauer 2018). In this sense, the distance between Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein could not be larger: whereas the former's worldview is nihilistic and pessimistic, the latter's worldview is mystical and religious.[59]

Despite the important differences mentioned earlier, as shown, Schopenhauer's and Wittgenstein's view of suicide share many similarities. It is, therefore, no surprise that they are exposed to similar criticism. As we have already seen in Chap. 3, Schopenhauer's rejection of suicide is based on an extremely limited and reductive view of suicide. Consistent with his bleak and pessimistic worldview, Schopenhauer presents the suicide as someone who is oppressed by the burdens of life and detests the sufferings deriving from it, being no longer willing to put up with the difficult lot that has fallen to him. Wittgenstein's view of suicide seems to be equally limited. What leads to suicide for him is, essentially, the condition of Kierkegaardian despair, which derives from a fundamental inability of the suicide to detach himself or herself from the happenings of the world or to come to terms with the miseries in it. Considered from an empirical point of view, this characterization of the motivations that lead human beings to commit suicide seems to be very limited and reductive.

That Wittgenstein has a very restricted view of suicide can also be seen from an important passage of the second letter to Engelmann. As the English translation is not literal, in what follows I will also quote the German text, which helps in clarifying the meaning of the passage:

> Surely one *cannot* will one's own destruction, and anybody who has visualized what is in practice involved in the act of suicide knows that suicide is always a *rushing of one's own defences*. But nothing is worse than to be forced to take oneself by surprise. (Engelmann 1967: 33, 35)

> Denn seine eigene Vernichtung *kann* man gar nicht wollen und jeder, der sich einmal den Vorgang beim Selbstmord vorgestellt hat, weiß, daß der Selbstmord immer eine *Überrumpelung* seiner selbst ist. Nichts aber ist ärger, als sich selbst überrumpeln zu müssen. (Engelmann 1967: 32, 34)

In this passage, Wittgenstein seems to imply that one can never *voluntarily* want to commit suicide. This conclusion appears to be based on a visualization of the process (*Vorgang*) of suicide, which is *always* the result of an ambush (*Überrumpelung*), the suicide being, at the same time, both the active subject and the passive object of the ambush. As the English translation makes explicit, ambush is a metaphor indicating that suicide is the result of a rushed and non-meditated choice, most probably caused by despair. When committing suicide, one acts impulsively, without pondering the situation, thus taking oneself by surprise.

Considered from an empirical point of view, both claims—(1) one can never voluntarily will one's own destruction, and (2) suicide is always the result of an ambush—seem to be

patently false. As a matter of fact, many suicides are the consequence of a reasoned, thoughtful, and deliberate decision. A man who is suffering from terminal illness can decide to anticipate his death because he wants to avoid experiencing a painful and demeaning death. Why should this choice be considered irrational, involuntary, or rushed? It is also possible that in the passage quoted earlier Wittgenstein is simply referring to the very final intention (the phenomenology at that very moment) to commit the action that will kill the individual, regardless of whether there has been planning in the run-up to it.[60] Even in this case, however, Wittgenstein's claim would be based on an unjustified universalization. Indeed, this characterization of the act of suicide would perfectly apply to a suicide like that of Kirillov from Dostoevsky's *Demons* (a suicide that has been previously planned and logically justified but that is eventually rushed and carried out in a frenzy) or to many other suicides committed out of despair or because of a momentary lapse of reason, but the complex phenomenology of the (final) act of suicide cannot be certainly reduced to the claim that suicide is always a rushing of one's own defences.

A more charitable reading can be advanced by calling the attention on the emphasis that Wittgenstein puts on the verb *kann*. Indeed, this emphasis might indicate that Wittgenstein does not *literally* mean that one can never voluntarily will one's own destruction but rather that, if before taking one's life one would consider one's situation from a rational point of view instead of following one's inclinations, one would never commit suicide. In other words, the whole point of the passage could be read as meaning that there are simply no valid, rational arguments in favour of suicide. This would shift the discussion from the empirical to the philosophical level. The problem in this case is that Wittgenstein does not provide any argument in favour of this claim (after all, he is writing a letter to a friend, not a philosophical text), which thus remains unsupported—unless we consider that claim (1) is supported by claim (2). Nevertheless, as shown, the assumption formulated by claim (2) is untenable from an empirical point of view.

Gómez Alonso suggests a third reading of the passage. According to his interpretation, when claiming that one cannot will one's own destruction, Wittgenstein takes the higher, transcendental standpoint. From this standpoint "willing ceases, and with willing the investment in life which motivates suicide ceases too" (Gómez Alonso 2018: 311). In other words, one cannot will suicide because, from a transcendental standpoint, one has no longer any reasons to will it. Undoubtedly, this reading of the passage is plausible. What remains to be explained is why, from an empirical standpoint (as opposed to the transcendental one), suicide should be *always* a rushing of one's own defences. That is, granted that from the transcendental perspective one would cease to have any reason to commit suicide, why should suicide be seen, from the empirical perspective, as *always* the result of a rushed and non-meditated choice?

Wittgenstein's claim that one cannot voluntarily will one's own destruction and that suicide is always a rushing of one's own defences raises the question of whether Wittgenstein conceives of suicide as an unfree act. To avoid this reading, Gómez Alonso (*id.*: 310) points out two senses of freedom that transcendental idealism involves: *formal* and *substantive* or *transcendental* freedom. He explains the distinction as follows:

> Rational suicide would be free in the formal sense as long as it is an act that far from being determined by animal drives, it results from the fact that the subject determines himself to follow a certain urge, thus making himself minimally independent of it.[61] However, such act would be *conditional*, and so, it could not be chosen from the perspective of an agent who instead of actively pursuing his natural ends in the process of making a decision, acts motivated by moral, transcendental ends. Thus, suicide would be a free act without being an act that expresses substantive freedom. (ibid.)

According to Gómez Alonso, Wittgenstein would locate suicide between unfree acts and acts that are free in the transcendental sense. The suicide would not be determined by his or her

animal drives but rather freely decide to follow his or her inclinations. The act would therefore be neither unfree (as involuntary, mechanical acts are) nor free in the higher transcendental sense but only *formally* free. This reading has the advantage of avoiding attributing an implausible view to Wittgenstein, according to which suicide would be always an unfree act. On the other hand, however, the same reading seems to minimize the emphasis that Wittgenstein puts on the fact that in the act of suicide one is always taken by surprise, that is, acts impulsively, without pondering the situation. In this sense, it seems unlikely that Wittgenstein would grant to the act of suicide two qualities such as rationality and autonomy—that is, the same qualities that are implied in Gómez Alonso's characterization of this act in the passage just quoted. In any case, it seems reasonable to suppose, as Gómez Alonso does, that Wittgenstein concedes at least a minimal freedom to those who take their lives, and makes a difference between the act of suicide and a mere mechanical act. Accordingly, suicide would be an impulsive but not necessarily an unfree act.

Going back to the entry in the *Notebooks*, two questions remain to be answered. The first question concerns the beginning of the entry: "If suicide is allowed then everything is allowed" (NB 10.1.17). How should this claim be interpreted? That is, why does Wittgenstein think that if suicide is allowed, then everything is allowed? As mentioned, according to Wittwer, this claim is not to be taken literally. Indeed, taken literally, this argument would give rise to some logical inconsistencies and it is implausible that Wittgenstein would have failed to detect such problems. It is also unlikely that Wittgenstein had in mind something like the crime argument against suicide that, as we have seen, Kant puts forward in the *Lectures on Ethics*.[62] Then, what is the meaning of this enigmatic claim? The Dostoevskian filiation of the formula gives us a hint. Indeed, by maintaining that if suicide is allowed, then everything is allowed, Wittgenstein seems to allude to the nihilistic consequences deriving from the allowance of suicide. It is as if, by accepting the possibility to take my life, I commit myself to a nihilistic view of existence: the world, that is, *my* world becomes meaningless. But once this nihilist view is taken, I am at risk of no longer caring for my ethical conduct, since for me everything has lost meaning. As Edwards (1982: 83) analogously puts it,

> [s]uicide is the "elementary sin," that is, the ultimate ethical failure, because suicide represents an admission of failure to find the sense of life that renders it worth living. And if that sense is not found, then everything is allowed. That is to say, until the sense of life is established, issues of conduct (what is and is not "allowed") are moot. The fundamental task of ethics is, therefore, to discover the sense of life.

Taking into account Wittgenstein's solipsism, it would be possible to put forward a different but complementary interpretation of the beginning of the entry. Given the match that for Wittgenstein exists between the world, language, and the totality of all possible experience, the limit of (my) language are the limits of the world. But if the world is the totality of all (my) possible experience, then "the world is *my* world" (TLP 5.62). Thus, "the world and life are one" (TLP 5.621, NB 24.7.16[63]) and "I am my world" (5.63). Given this identification between (my) world and (my) life, it would be possible to interpret Wittgenstein's claim "if suicide is allowed then everything is allowed" as meaning that if it is allowed to put an end to the world/life through suicide, then everything inside that world/life is permitted. By analogy, we could say that, if it is allowed to burn your house, it is also allowed to burn every single object that your house contains. This is why Wittgenstein would consider suicide as the elementary sin.[64]

The second question that remains to be answered concerns the ending of the entry, namely Wittgenstein's question: "Or is even suicide in itself neither good nor evil?" (NB 10.1.17). How is this ending to be interpreted? Is Wittgenstein calling into question his own assumption that if suicide is allowed then everything is allowed? This ending is even more enigmatic than the beginning of the entry and here I can only offer a tentative reading. My hypothesis is that Wittgenstein is here referring to his own, peculiar view of the nature of

ethics.[65] As shown in the previous section, for Wittgenstein, good and bad are not ethical attributes of the world but of the willing subject. This means that an action is *in itself* neither (morally) good nor bad. Good or bad is uniquely the will of the person that decides to bring about the action. An action can be thus described as good or bad only in relation to the ethical will that is connected with it. According to this view, at the end of the entry Wittgenstein asks himself whether even suicide, which he considers as the elementary sin, is *in itself*, like all the other actions, neither good nor evil. This hesitation can be explained by the fact that this entry dates from the period in which Wittgenstein was still working out his view of the nature of ethics. It is, therefore, plausible to assume that, at the time, his view was not yet fully developed, hence the final doubt that puts an end to the entry.

5.4 Concluding Remarks

Suicide was for Wittgenstein an intensely personal matter. Two, probably three, of his brothers took their life. He also often had suicidal thoughts and suffered from depression, at least until the early 1920s. Besides, he was also more or less directly affected by the suicide of Weininger, Boltzmann, and Trakl. Considering the importance that suicide had on his private life, it is thus surprising to remark that, of the four authors considered in this book, Wittgenstein was the one who paid less attention to suicide. As shown, his considerations on suicide are essentially reduced to three sources: two notebook entries and a pair of letters sent to his friend Engelmann. All the three sources contain relatively brief thoughts on suicide, so that Wittgenstein's view of this act must be reconstructed by putting together the few remarks left on the subject and by contrasting them with his general view of the world and the nature of ethics. Since this general view was shaped by a number of authors (such as Weininger, James, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Kierkegaard, and Schopenhauer, among others) who exerted a strong influence on his early thought, it is also important to take into account this influence when considering Wittgenstein's remarks on suicide.

It is difficult to say why Wittgenstein's considerations on suicide are so few in number. One can only speculate in this regard. Perhaps, suicide was too delicate a subject for him to broach, a subject that evoked painful memories. It might also be that he considered the matter settled: for him, suicide was the elementary sin and always a dirty thing to do, so that he did not deem the subject worthy of further consideration. Be as it may, it would be a mistake to infer from these few entries that Wittgenstein considered the subject as unimportant. It would be equally wrong to think that these remarks lack philosophical value or significance, or that they are unworthy of serious consideration for being unpublished thoughts. On the contrary, Wittgenstein's remarks on suicide compel us to consider a number of fundamental issues that concern the nature of suicide, issues such as the relation between suicide and ethics, free will, or the meaning of life. Certainly, these remarks raise more questions than they answer. But it can be said that the value of a philosopher consists not only in the answers he gives but also in the questions he raises.

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Footnotes

1 After Wittgenstein’s death, his sister Margarete gave the manuscript as a personal memento to Rudolf Koder, an old friend of Wittgenstein.

2 See Klagge and Nordmann (2002: 4).

3 I draw this and the following biographical information from three main sources: McGuinness (1990), Monk (1991), and Waugh (2009).

4 I here use Waugh's translation (see Waugh 2009: 79).

5 It is interesting to contrast what happened to Paul with the following passage from Norman Malcolm's memoir (the reference is to Wittgenstein's stay in Ithaca, NY, in the summer of 1949, approximately two years before his death): "More than once, Wittgenstein said to me that it was a problem for him as to what to do with the remainder of his life. 'When a person had only one thing in the world–namely, a certain talent–what is he to do when he begins to lose that talent?' he asked. Wittgenstein spoke so earnestly and sombrely that I, knowing that three of his brothers had committed suicide, feared that he might attempt the same."

6 It should also be mentioned that an aunt and a cousin committed suicide as well. See Waugh (2009: 37). Furthermore, on 15 June 1938, Jerome Stonborough, who in 1905 had married Ludwig's sister Margaret (Gretl), took his life.

7 For a list of prominent Austrians of the time who committed suicide, see Janik and Toulmin (1973: 64–65).

8 McGuinnes (1990: 47–48). On this, see also Waugh (2009: 37).

9 Paradoxically, Wittgenstein's severe critiques of Russell's manuscript *Theory of Knowledge* convinced Russell that he was no longer capable of fundamental work in philosophy, producing in him an almost suicidal depression. On this, see Monk (1991: 80–83).

10 The *Geheime Tagebücher* contain coded entries about private matters and should not be confused with the *Notebooks 1914–1916*, containing philosophical remarks written in normal script. The coded entries were written on left pages of the notebooks, whereas the pages on the right contain the remarks in normal script.

11 See the two letters to Russell dating from Christmas 1913 and January 1914 (McGuinness 2008: 63, 65).

12 See also Rhees (1984: 106).

13 See Monk (1991: 132). On the philological problem concerning the specific German edition actually read by Wittgenstein, see Llinares Chover (2010: 106–108).

14 According to Bartley (1973: 44), "in 1920 Wittgenstein told his schoolteacher colleague Martin Scherleitner, in Trattenbach, that he had originally volunteered to serve in the First World War in order to find death, as a method of suicide."

15 See Somavilla (2013).

16 See also what Wittgenstein wrote to Eccles on 7 May 1925: "England may not have changed since 1913 but *I* have. However, it is no use writing to you the exact nature of the change (though I perfectly understand it) you will see it yourself when I get there" (Eccles 1963: 62).

17 See GT 20 and 21.10.14; 5, 9, 14 and 17.11.14; 8 and 14.3.15.

18 See McGuinness (1990: 264) and Monk (1991: 154).

19 See also the letter that Wittgenstein sent to Russell on 7 July 1920: “How things will go for me—how I’ll endure life—God only knows. The best for me, perhaps, would be if I could lie down one evening and not wake up again. (But perhaps there is something better left for me.) We shall see” (McGuinness 2008: 121).

20 See Glock (1999), Schroeder (2012), and Jacquette (2017).

21 See also Drury’s recollection of a conversation with Wittgenstein dating from the autumn of 1948: “When I read Schopenhauer,” Wittgenstein said, “I seem to see to the bottom very easily. He is not deep in the sense that Kant and Berkeley are deep” (Rhees 1984: 158).

22 According to Malcolm (2001: 45), Wittgenstein once said that “*The House of the Dead* was Dostoevsky’s greatest work.”

23 See also Paperno (1997).

24 See McGuinness (2013: 233). Before and after school teaching, Wittgenstein entertained the idea of entering a monastery. He even worked as a gardener’s assistant at a monastery.

25 It is noteworthy that, in the notes for the novel’s ending, Raskolnikov was to take his life by shooting himself (Lantz 2004: 426). However, this ending would have deprived the novel of its *pars construens*, namely the possibility of Raskolnikov’s spiritual rebirth and future resurrection.

26 As Wittgenstein writes to Engelmann, “[o]f course it all boils down to the fact that I have no faith!” (Engelmann 1967: 35).

27 A footnote explains that “the words ‘& suicide does not end it’ were written between two lines as if he [Wittgenstein] was planning perhaps to insert them behind ‘unless one puts an end to it’. Wittgenstein used an arrow to indicate their insertion behind ‘has no end’” (Klagge and Nordmann 2002: 127).

28 On Kierkegaard’s influence on Wittgenstein, see Schönbaumsfeld (2007).

29 Wittgenstein confessed to some of his friends and family members that he had done nothing to prevent most people he knew from thinking that he was three-quarters Aryan and one-quarter Jewish, whereas the reverse was the case. When he was a school teacher, he had also hit and hurt a little girl, and had later denied the fact. Beyond these two major sins, Wittgenstein confessed a number of minor sins as well. See Monk (1991: 367–372) and Rhees (1984: 34–39).

30 For a detailed analysis of Wittgenstein’s reading of James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, see Goodman (2004: 36–59) and Sanfélix Vidarte (2007).

31 Wittgenstein alludes here to the fifth act of *Faust*’s second part, in which four grey women (Want, Debt, Care, and Distress) appear in Faust’s courtyard. Of the four women, only Care (German: *Sorge*) is able to slip through the keyhole of the portal. She then presents herself to Faust as follows: “Once I make a man my own, / nothing in this world can help him; / everlasting darkness falls, / suns no longer rise or set—/ though no outward sense has failed, / all is darkness in his heart, / and however great his treasures, / there’s no joy in their possession. / Good and bad luck both depress him, / he is starving though there’s plenty; / source of joy or spot of trouble, / it’s postponed until the morrow—/ caring only for the future, / he gets nothing done at all” (Goethe 2014: 289).

32 Term coined by the French psychologist Théodule-Armand Ribot.

33 As Llinares Chover (2010: 113) points out, Tolstoy transferred his spiritual crisis to his fictional alter ego, *Anna Karenina*'s character Levin (Levin is a diminutive of Lev, Tolstoy's own name). See the following passage from the last part of *Anna Karenina*: "And, happy in his family life, a healthy man, Levin was several times so close to suicide that he hid a rope lest he hang himself with it, and was afraid to go about with a rifle lest he shoot himself. But Levin did not shoot himself or hang himself and went on living" (Tolstoy 2001: 530). It is noteworthy that, in an entry of 2 September 1913, David Pinsent wrote in his diary: "He [Wittgenstein] is—in his acute sensitiveness—very like Levin in 'Anna Karenina'" (Wright 1990: 64).

34 It is precisely to this ethical demand that Wittgenstein's following passage from the aforementioned letter to Russell (22 June 1912) refers: "I don't mean to say that I will be a saint soon, but I am not sure that it [James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*] does not improve me a little" (McGuinness 2008: 30).

35 This attitude probably finds its clearest expression in Wittgenstein's decision to give away his entire inheritance after the end of the First World War. As Monk (1991: 171) points out, on his arrival home from the war Wittgenstein was one of the wealthiest men in Europe. In one month, his complete inheritance was made over to his sisters Helene and Hermine, and to his brother Paul. Wittgenstein's insistence that his inheritance be given in its entirety, without any money put aside for him (in case he should later come to regret his decision), precisely recalls James' claim that the desire for regeneration is incomplete and ineffective as long as one does not give up all possessions. As James puts it, "[s]o long as any secular safeguard is retained, so long as any residual prudential guarantee is clung to, so long the surrender is incomplete, the vital crisis is not passed, fear still stands sentinel, and mistrust of the divine obtains" (James 1985: 321).

36 On Weininger's influence on Wittgenstein, see Janik (1985) and Stern and Szabados (2004).

37 See Weininger 2005: 139: "Any ethics is only possible in accordance with the laws of logic, and any logic is at the same time an ethical law."

38 The German word used by Weininger is *Heiligkeit*.

39 Schopenhauer's sentence is quoted explicitly in *On Last Things*. See Weininger (2001: 118).

40 See Wright (1955: 532–533) and Monk (1991: 118).

41 The *Lecture on Ethics* was given in Cambridge sometime between September 1929 and December 1930.

42 In his *Introduction* to the *Tractatus*, Russell remarks that "Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said. […] The whole subject of ethics, for example, is placed by Mr. Wittgenstein in the mystical, inexpressible region. Nevertheless he is capable of conveying his ethical opinion" (Wittgenstein 2001: xxiii-xxiv).

43 See Barrett (1991: 32–33) and Stokhof (2002: 214). This is the part of the *Tractatus* that seemed to Anscombe most obviously wrong: "As Wittgenstein asks in *Philosophical Investigation* (§644): 'Did not your intention reside also in what you *did*?' 'What happens' includes 'actions', in the sense of the word in which 'good' and 'bad' are predicated of actions" (Anscombe 1965: 172).

44 See section VII, *Of the Idea of Necessary Connection*.

45 Compare with the following passage from section IV of the *Enquiry*: "The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality. *That the sun will not rise to-morrow* is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction, than the affirmation, *that it will rise*" (Hume 2007: 18). On Wittgenstein's Humean view of causation, see Cook (1994). On Wittgenstein on causation and induction, see Sandis and Tejedor (2017).

46 For a more detailed analysis of Wittgenstein's conception of a happy life, see Somavilla (2013).

47 On 4 January (it was a Thursday), Wittgenstein sent a letter to Engelmann, announcing that he was going to leave Vienna on Saturday night, namely on 6 January. See Engelmann (1967: 3).

48 See McGuinness (1990: 257).

49 See McGuinness (2013: 231).

50 See Dostoevsky (1992: 69, 82, 263, 589, 632, 649).

51 The logic behind Ivan's idea is obviously more complex. For a detailed analysis, see Stellino (2015: 158–163, 214–216).

52 Another important source was Meister Eckhart. As Russell Nieli (1987: 154) points out, "Wittgenstein's eternal Present, transcending time and history, is virtually identical with the eternal Now symbol of Meister Eckhart."

53 See Sect. 4.1 of this book.

54 Readers interested in a further analysis of Schopenhauer's influence on Wittgenstein's view of suicide may refer to Gómez Alonso's paper. I find Gómez Alonso's analysis convincing and, in certain aspects, my interpretation of Wittgenstein's view of suicide is indebted to his.

55 See Sect. 3.3 of this book. See also Gómez Alonso (2018: 305, 307).

56 The three experiences are the experience of wondering at the existence of the world, the experience of feeling absolutely safe, and the experience of feeling guilty. Wittgenstein points out how these experiences are analogous to the following religious expressions: God created the world, we feel safe in the hands of God, and God disapproves of our conduct.

57 To be more precise, Schopenhauer makes specific reference to the arguments put forward by the monotheistic religions. As I have already pointed out in Chap. 3 of this book (Sect. 3.1), Schopenhauer emphasizes the fact that Hinduism, far from condemning or prohibiting suicide, considers it as a religious action.

58 See Sect. 3.2 of this book.

59 See Gómez Alonso (2018: 316–317).

60 I am thankful to the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this possibility.

61 See Kant's distinction between *arbitrium sensitivum brutum* and *liberum* in Sect. 2.2.3 of this book, dedicated to Kant's *freedom argument* against suicide.

62 See Kant (LE, Collins 27: 372/Kant 1997): "anyone who has already got so far as to be master, at any time, over his own life, is also master over the life of anyone else; for him, the door stands open to every crime, and before he can be seized he is ready to spirit himself away out of the world." On this, see Sect. 2.2.2 of this book.

63 In the *Notebooks*, Wittgenstein clarifies that "physiological life is of course not 'Life'. And neither is psychological life. Life is the world" (NB 24.7.16).

64 I owe this alternative reading to Vicente Sanfélix Vidarte.

65 Recall that, according to Wittgenstein, the two initial propositions of the entry—"If suicide is allowed then everything is allowed / If anything is not allowed then suicide is not allowed"—throw "a light on the nature of ethics."

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6. Conclusion: What Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein Can Teach Us About Suicide

Paolo Stellino[1] ✉
(1) Nova Institute of Philosophy, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, LISBOA, Portugal

✉ **Paolo Stellino**
Email: paolo.stellino@fcsh.unl.pt

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In her introduction to the book *Suicide and Ethics*, Margaret P. Battin (1983) points out that, in the field of applied ethics, most studies on suicide focus on questions such as the following: Is suicide a rational choice? Is it morally permitted? Do the obligations that we have towards society and others override any right we may have of disposing of our own life? These are the same questions that, directly or indirectly, the four philosophers considered in this book ask in their published works or in private notes or letters. As shown, the answers given are very different. If we were to represent graphically the various positions by drawing a line, we would locate Kant and Nietzsche at either end of the line. Kant maintains a strict prohibition of suicide and an unconditioned duty to oneself to self-preservation. Especially in the Collins lectures, Kant displays very little understanding and compassion towards those who take their own life: in his view, suicide is "certainly the most dreadful thing that a man can do to himself" (LE, Collins 27/Kant 1997: 391). Nietzsche, on the contrary, defends the idea that, on certain specific occasions, voluntary death is a wholly rational and natural act, accomplished in accordance with one's own personal values and interests. Due to the influence of our religious education, Nietzsche maintains, we have a strong prejudice in favour of natural death: but why should it be more rational for an old man "to await his slow exhaustion and dissolution" (HH I 80/Nietzsche 1996) rather than to set rationally a limit to his life, once he senses that his life cycle has come to an end?

Schopenhauer's view of suicide must be located between the two extreme positions of Kant and Nietzsche. Although in the *World as Will and Representation* Schopenhauer clearly writes that considered from a metaphysical point of view suicide is "a futile and foolish act" (WWR I/Schopenhauer 2010: 426), for it leaves the thing in itself untouched, in his essay *On Suicide* he maintains that "if we climb down from that very high standpoint, then there is no longer a tenable moral reason to condemn suicide" (PP II/Schopenhauer 2015: 279). Unlike Kant, Schopenhauer does not oppose any kind of suicide, but rather speaks favourably of one particular form, namely voluntary death by starvation. Furthermore, he certainly displays a

more benevolent and compassionate attitude than Kant towards those who take their life—most probably as a consequence of the traumatic experience of his father's suicide when he was only seventeen years old. As we have seen, Wittgenstein's personal life was also marked by (more than one) suicide. His judgement of this act is, however, more akin to Kant's than to Schopenhauer's. Indeed, he considers that suicide is "the elementary sin" (NB 10.1.17/Wittgenstein 1998) and that it is "always a dirty thing to do" (Engelmann 1967: 33). Thus, despite the undeniable influence that Schopenhauer's thought exerted on his early philosophy and view of suicide, in his rigid condemnation of this act Wittgenstein comes closer to Kant.

Wittgenstein's consideration of suicide as the elementary sin is particularly interesting for, as Battin (1983: 17) points out, it hints at the fundamental nature of the relationship between this act and ethics. Indeed, according to Wittgenstein, just like one investigates mercury vapour in order to understand the nature of vapours, one may investigate suicide in order to comprehend the nature of ethics. This approach to suicide is more fundamental than the usual approach of applied ethics synthesized in the initial questions mentioned earlier. Here, suicide "can be considered a test case for moral theories themselves. This is to realize that suicide is not just an act like any other, but that there is something unique about its role in morality" (ibid.). According to Battin, "Wittgenstein does nothing more to articulate the nature of this relationship, or, indeed, call it into question" (ibid.). This is certainly right for what concerns the specific entry, to which Battin refers. As we have seen, however, this relationship can be reconstructed by taking into consideration the wider context of Wittgenstein's early worldview. It is precisely this context that gives the reader the key to understand why Wittgenstein thinks that suicide is so different from all the other morally relevant acts, and why this peculiarity throws a light on the nature of ethics.

Besides the complex philosophical context that gives meaning to Wittgenstein's entry, following Battin (and Wittgenstein) one might ask why suicide should be considered as an act that differs from all the other morally relevant acts. In other words, what is so special and unique about suicide? An obvious answer to this question can be found in Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Having famously declared that "there is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide," Camus justifies his claim by explaining that "[i]f I ask myself how to judge that this question is more urgent than that [all the remaining philosophical questions], I reply that one judges by the actions it entails. I have never seen anyone die for the ontological argument" (Camus 1975: 11). To this one might reply that although no one ever died for the ontological argument, in 2013 a man in Russia was repeatedly shot because of a quarrel over Kant's philosophy.[1] Irony aside, however, Camus is certainly right in pointing out that, unlike other morally relevant acts, suicide always entails the death of the one who accomplishes this action—just like murder always entails the death of the one who is murdered.[2] In other words, to put a complex matter simply: a wrong can be usually undone (or expiated), death cannot. Furthermore, it can also be argued that whereas other morally relevant acts may imply a debasement of the human character, suicide differently implies the definitive annihilation of the moral agent.

Assuming with Wittgenstein, Camus, and Battin that there is something special and unique about suicide, one might ask what follows *concretely* from this consideration. For instance, given that the choice to take one's own life is one of the

most fundamental life choices, if not the most fundamental one, is it appropriate to prescribe in this case rigid, universal moral laws and obligations, just as we do with stealing, lying, or any other similar action? Indeed, as much as one can agree with Durkheim (2002) that suicide can be viewed as a social, collective phenomenon, it is undeniable that the choice to take leave of life is highly individual and personal. This is precisely what, in his polemic with suicidology, Jean Améry (1999: 3) points out in the following passage: "Whenever suicide is observed as an objective fact, as when scientists observe galaxies and elemental particles, observers become distant from voluntary death, more and more so in proportion to the data and facts they gather." According to Améry, what suicidology does not take into account in its approach to suicides and potential suicides is "the total and unmistakable singularity of their situation, the *situation vécue* (lived situation)" (*id.*: 8). It is precisely the subjective and singular aspect of this *situation vécue* (term which reveals Améry's debt to French existentialism, particularly to Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy) that, in Améry's view, condemns to failure any objectifying and universalizing approach to suicide: "Outside of the ego, enclosed in itself and perhaps finding its nucleus at the end, no one else will be able to assess this act. The world's objectivity will try to dissect it: it will only be dead tissue, which practiced hands and brains will reduce to pulp with as much industry as futility" (*id.*: 92).

Of the four philosophers considered in this study, Nietzsche seems to be the one that gives most attention to the *situation vécue*. Certainly, both Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein pay attention to the psychological condition of despair that leads to suicide but, as shown, in doing this they tend to universalize this condition, thus presenting a limited and reductive view of the motives that lead one to take one's own life. Nietzsche, on the contrary, puts much emphasis on the fact that suicide is a personal and individual decision, and in this sense only the individual can ascertain whether, in certain specific situations, it is more rational to take leave of life instead of keep on living. Similarly, only the individual knows when the right time for death has come—for, according to Nietzsche, the timeliness of death depends on whether one's life cycle has come to an end, something which cannot be measured by objective, external standards, but rather depends on subjective considerations such as the achievement of one's personal life-task.

Admittedly, one might consider Nietzsche's view of suicide as highly idealized (as Fox (1980: 168) points out, the typical case of the ageing wise man who commits suicide is largely fictional) and far from the bitter, true reality of life, where suicide may be often caused, among other factors, by the end of a relationship, sexual or physical abuse, bullying, loneliness and social isolation, money, or mental health problems. Still, it must be considered that Nietzsche's free death is a *regulative ideal* and that he is above all interested in restoring a correct appreciation of voluntary death against its denaturalization orchestrated by Christianity. Furthermore, Nietzsche's approach has the merit of laying emphasis on the subjective conditions constituting the context of every act of suicide, which in its singularity and uniqueness is different from any other.

Should we then take into consideration these subjective conditions (Améry's *situation vécue*) when assessing the rationality and morality of suicide? And what about Améry's claim that, outside of the ego, no one else is able to assess an act of suicide? These questions have no easy answer and it certainly goes beyond the scope of this conclusive chapter to provide an answer to them. However, some considerations can be put forward in relation to the four philosophers considered in

this study. First, as Wittwer (2003: 40–41) points out, for a long time philosophy has ignored the variety of possible suicides and tended to approach this phenomenon monolithically. Yet, suicides may have different conditions and causes, or pursue different ends. This being the case, why should we pass a general judgement upon a phenomenon that is so multifaceted and complex? As we have seen, all the four philosophers considered in this book are, to a different extent, guilty of this exemplification. In both the Collins lectures and the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant lays much emphasis on the fact that the suicide's maxim rests on inclination and that the suicide's end is desire-based. In a passage from the Collins lectures, Kant clearly says that to kill oneself is contrary to morality, "for the intention is, by sacrificing one's condition, to abandon at a stroke all the pains and hardships of life; but in so doing, humanity is subordinated to animal nature, and my understanding is under the sway of animal impulse" (LE, Collins 27: 1428). In the *World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer presents the suicidal individual as someone who is typically oppressed by the burdens of life and detests the sufferings deriving from it, being no longer willing to put up with the difficult lot that has fallen upon him. As mentioned, this limited and reductive view of suicide is all the more surprising if we consider the extremely rich phenomenology of suicide that one can find in Schopenhauer's writings and manuscript remains. Nietzsche pays great attention to the subjective conditions that may lead one to take one's life, but he mainly approaches the theme of suicide from a very specific perspective: that of the old man who, having lived his life and reached his goal, freely and autonomously decides that the time has come to take a fully conscious leave of life. Finally, Wittgenstein's view of suicide seems to be equally limited. In his view, the suicidal condition is essentially triggered by Kierkegaardian despair, which derives from a fundamental inability of the suicide to detach himself or herself from the happenings of the world or to come to terms with the miseries in it. In all these cases, if considered from an empirical point of view, the characterization of the motivations that may lead a human being to commit suicide seems to be very limited and reductive.

A second aspect regarding the question of whether subjective conditions should be taken into account when assessing the rationality and morality of suicide concerns an important distinction that should be made between, as it were, an *a priori* and *a posteriori* assessment of the act of suicide. This distinction can be easily explained by referring to Améry's book *On Suicide*. When he criticizes the suicidology's objective approach to suicide, which ignores the subjective and personal dimension of every act of suicide, Améry is making reference to the *a posteriori* assessment of suicide. The goal is here to understand the riddle of the phenomenon of suicide, to "view it from the interior" (Améry 1999: xxiii), to comprehend what leads one to take the leap. On the contrary, when in the same book Améry asks "*to whom does a human being belong?*" (*id.*: 94), he is approaching suicide from the perspective that antedates the act. Suicide has not yet been accomplished and the question here is whether the individual has the right to put a free and voluntary end to his or her life.

Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein fundamentally consider suicide from the latter perspective, that is, they are essentially interested in the question of whether suicide can be regarded as a rational act and can be morally permitted. This may come as no surprise, since they are all philosophers and one of the main tasks of philosophy, as traditionally conceived, is to offer normative guidance

concerning how we ought to act. Needless to say, the content of this guidance may greatly vary according to one's view of morality (Kant and Nietzsche), metaphysical worldview (Schopenhauer), or conception of the happy life (Wittgenstein). In particular, for what concerns the question asked earlier—that is, whether we should take into account subjective considerations when assessing the rationality and morality of suicide—Kant and Nietzsche hold two diametrically opposed views. As shown, Kant thinks that every rational being should act out of respect for the moral law. This law has universal validity, that is, it commands us "how to act irrespective of our wants or our contingent ends" (Wood 2008: 67). This is precisely the reason for which one can never dispose of one's own life, even if one "feels weary of life because of a series of ills that has grown to the point of hopelessness" (G, 4/Kant 2011: 421). Like Kant, Nietzsche as well puts strong emphasis on the fact that the moral law must be self-given. This law is, however, of a very different kind from Kant's: it is not universal, but rather subjective. As Nietzsche puts it in a well-known passage from the third part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "[b]ut he will have discovered himself who speaks: 'This is *my* good and evil.' With this he has silenced the mole and dwarf who says: 'Good for all, evil for all'" (Z III, *On the Spirit of Gravity*/Nietzsche 2006). The case of suicide exemplarily clarifies Nietzsche's notion of self-determination and autonomy: it is up to the individual to determine the moment of her death in accordance, not with religious prescriptions or universal moral laws, but rather with one's own personal values, beliefs, and commitments.

As one can see, behind these two opposing views of suicide lies a more fundamental opposition between two different ways of conceiving the binding character of the moral laws and, above all, the relation between life and morality. As we have seen, if on the one hand Kant recognizes that human life is intrinsically valuable, on the other hand, he thinks that this value is something *secondary* and *derivative* that implies a prior element, namely, morality. Accordingly, Kant establishes a *primacy of morality over life*. This means not only that man is not free to dispose of his own life when he so wishes (for in so doing, he would root out the existence of morality from the world) but more importantly that, should he be forced to choose between life and morality, priority must be given to the latter. Nietzsche, on the contrary, indirectly reverses the hierarchical relation that Kant establishes between morality and life. Like any other values, moral values derive from a human creation: man creates values in order to give meaning to an inherently meaningless existence. These values must not be inimical to life (like those of Christian morality) but rather be life-enhancing and life-affirming. Nietzsche thus clearly gives life a primacy over morality, so that his position may be best summarized by the last sentence of Frankena's *Ethics* (1963: 116): "Morality is made for man, not man for morality." In line with this position, Nietzsche thinks not only that, in certain cases, voluntary death is permitted and even the right thing to do, but also that it is the most profound expression of one's moral autonomy and freedom.[3]

Once again, Schopenhauer's and Wittgenstein's views are located between these two extreme positions. According to Schopenhauer, strictly speaking, suicide is not morally prohibited but rather metaphysically useless and futile. Precisely for this reason, however, this act appears in an unfavourable light, for it stands in the path of the attainment of the highest moral goal, which is the complete negation of the will. In this sense, self-preservation is not morally obligatory but rather morally supererogatory. It must not be forgotten, however, that Schopenhauer does not oppose any kind of suicide but, as mentioned, rather speaks favourably of one

particular form, namely voluntary death by starvation. For his part, Wittgenstein has a very peculiar view of ethics. Like the propositions of philosophy, the propositions of ethics are nonsensical, and any attempt to formulate and justify ethical principles, rules and laws, according to which we could regulate our moral conduct, is doomed to result in nonsense. For this reason, Wittgenstein is not interested in establishing whether and when one is morally allowed to commit suicide, but is rather interested in pointing out the fundamental connection between suicide and ethics.

Of the four philosophers considered in this book, Kant is the one who displays less sympathy and understanding for suicide. In the *Lectures on Ethics*, this act is variously described as abominable, horrible, unnatural, self-contradictory, revulsive, beastly, immoral, disreputable, dreadful, and unpardonable. According to Kant, "neither the greatest advantages, nor the highest degree of well-being, nor the most excruciating pains and even irremediable bodily sufferings can give a man the authority to take his own life, to escape from anguish and enter earlier upon a hoped-for higher happiness" (LE, Vigilantius 27: 628). Being so severe and rigid, Kant's view of suicide runs the risk of appearing as too demanding, if not even cold and heartless. Schopenhauer precisely criticizes this aspect of Kant's moral theory in the following passage from his essay *On the Basis of Morals*:

> An action, he [Kant] says […], has genuine moral worth only when it happens exclusively from *duty* and merely for the sake of *duty*, without any inclination towards it. Worth of character is to commence only when someone, without sympathy of the heart, cold and indifferent to the sufferings of others, and *not properly born to be a philanthropist*, nevertheless displays beneficence merely for the sake of tiresome *duty*. This assertion, which outrages genuine moral feeling, this apotheosis of unkindness which directly opposes the Christian moral doctrine that places love above all else and allows nothing to count without it, […] this tactless moral pedantry has been satirized by *Schiller*. (BM: 136–137/Schopenhauer 2009)

Admittedly, Schopenhauer seems to be criticizing a "straw man" rather than Kant. Allen W. Wood (2008: 35) warns that "we must be careful not to foist on Kant the crude error that opposes 'reason' to 'emotion' and assumes they must be mutually exclusive." Still, suicide is one of those topics in which emotion seems to be entirely absent from Kant's ethical theory. His strict and rigid prohibition of suicide may undoubtedly appear nowadays as too cruel and severe, as well as blind to physical and psychological pain or suffering. It is thus hardly surprising that, given this inflexibility and rigidity, many contemporary Kantian scholars look for a less strict alternative and propose a modified Kantian view of suicide.

Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's views of suicide are certainly more sympathetic than Kant's. In this respect, they both have the merit to have paved the way for a more humane approach to suicide. In a touching passage from his essay *On Suicide*, Schopenhauer harshly criticizes the habit of considering suicide as a crime and says that in this matter we should let our moral feeling judge. The news of suicide moves us to "sorrow and compassion," he says, and then reminds us that we all have had "acquaintances, friends, relatives who have voluntarily departed this world" (PP II/Schopenhauer 2015: 276). Nietzsche, for his part, lays emphasis on the fact that a voluntary death accomplished at the right time allows a true leave-taking among

children and witnesses, “when the one who is taking his leave *is still there*” (TI, *Raids*, 36).

Nietzsche’s view of suicide, as mentioned, might be seen as highly idealized. Still, his approach to suicide raises important questions regarding the way in which we tend to think about the end of life. One of the most characteristic features of this approach is the fact that it calls into question the shared tendency to consider natural death as being *always* the most obvious, rational, and *natural* option. According to Nietzsche, this biased view of natural death mainly derives from the influence exerted by religions (particularly Christian religion) over the past centuries. But outside a religious mode of thinking, Nietzsche asks, what is the reason to consider this death as more rational and more *natural* than voluntary death? Here, the real problem for Nietzsche is that this glorification of natural death has gone hand in hand with a denaturalization of voluntary death. As a consequence, suicide has been regarded in an unfavourable light and variously conceived as abominable, horrible, unnatural, self-contradictory, revulsive, and beastly, just to borrow some of the epithets used by Kant in the *Lectures on Ethics*. Finally, Nietzsche also revindicates the role that freedom and autonomy should play in such a private and personal decision as the way in which we should die. Why should we let morality, religion, or society dictate *how* and *when* we should take leave of life? Should the observance of morality be considered as higher than life, as Kant thought, or should morality be at the service of life? As shown, Kant’s, Schopenhauer’s, Nietzsche’s, and Wittgenstein’s approaches to these questions do not have the necessary and required specificity, which the philosophical debate on suicide has achieved in the last decades. Nevertheless, the fundamental questions they—directly or indirectly—ask are still the same as those that shape and guide the contemporary debate.

If compared with Kant’s rigid view of suicide, Nietzsche’s approach to suicide, attentive to personal values and beliefs, undoubtedly allows for more *plasticity* and avoids the paradoxical consequences which, as shown in Sect. 2.3.3, Kant’s view may lead to in certain extreme cases. According to Nietzsche, no one is obliged to preserve life if this means to unwillingly endure unbearable pain and suffering for the mere sake of self-preservation. In this case, life has a primacy over morality, which is a human creation. It is the latter that has to serve the needs of the former, and if in certain cases suicide may be considered as a wholly natural and rational act, then it is the task of the “morality of the future”—which Nietzsche advocates in section 185 of *The Wanderer and His Shadow*—to change our moral perception of this act. Here, it might be objected that the same plasticity that allows Nietzsche to avoid the paradoxical and inhumane consequences of Kant’s view also allows him to advocate the idea of a quick death for the sick. Although perhaps too rigid and severe, so the objection might go, Kant’s strict prohibition of disposing of the humanity in one’s own person protects us from the risk of abusing the right to life that is granted to every human being. Here, one might point out that even Kant’s philosophy is not completely safe from such risk (Sharp 2012). However, the obvious difference is that, whereas Nietzsche openly entertains the possibility of a new morality for physicians (TI, *Raids*, 36), Kant never defends, for instance, a moral duty for the soon-to-be demented to commit suicide (Cooley 2007), and it is a matter of debate whether such duty can or cannot be derived from Kant’s moral theory.

The question that one should ask here is the following: to what extent does the acceptance of Nietzsche's idea of free death imply the acceptance of his idea of quick death? That is, is there an inevitable slippery slope that leads from the former to the latter, or can the two ideas be maintained separately? Here, it might be pointed out that very few of those who defend the idea of a free and voluntary death (like Améry) also defend the idea of a quick death for sick people: there is simply no logical necessity that leads from *a* (free death) to *b* (quick death). There is, however, little doubt that, in order to escape the risk of the slippery slope and make Nietzsche's view actual or useful for the contemporary debate, any attempt to defend the Nietzschean notion of free death must begin from recognizing the *unconditional inviolability of every human being*. The most obvious way to do this is to consider as essential and inescapable precisely those two ideals of *freedom* and *autonomy* which are central to Nietzsche's notion of free death.

Abstracting from the specific context of Nietzsche's view of suicide, the question concerning the inevitability of the slippery slope relates to a concrete and widespread concern. Imagine that *a* is assisted suicide and *b* active euthanasia. Now, granted that there is no logical necessity that leads from *a* to *b*, is there nevertheless a concrete risk that, once *a* is legally and morally accepted, other practices such as *b* may be regarded as legally and morally permitted or even required? This question has no straightforward answer, for as David Benatar (2011: 206) points out, "it is, of course, easier to assert the existence of a slippery slope than to prove that it exists." Supporters of the legalization of assisted suicide usually point out that, in those countries (such as Switzerland and the Netherlands) where this practice is legal, to qualify for assistance, individuals who seek physician-assisted suicide must meet very precise criteria (the request must be voluntary and well considered, the patient's suffering must be unbearable and hopeless, treatment possibilities and alternatives must be carefully reviewed, etc.). On the contrary, opponents of assisted suicide tend to point out that, in those same countries, the law is getting more permissive and that the practice is being applied too widely. Is this empirical evidence sufficient to support the slippery slope argument? An answer to this question requires a careful analysis of the empirical evidence available to us.

This is an ongoing and heated debate, with many different arguments put forward, that is getting more and more public attention. After all, what is at stake here is a fundamental decision about the way in which we die. Thankfully, the issue of assisted suicide is now entering the political agenda with increased frequency. What should be avoided here is a normative void. The recent case of Fabiano Antoniani (known as DJ Fabo), which generated an intense public debate in Italy, is paradigmatic. After a car accident in 2014, Fabiani was left paraplegic and blind. Twenty to sixty daily muscular spasms led him to suffer unbearable pain, which could not be relieved. Given that even experimental treatments were ineffective, Fabiani appealed to President Sergio Mattarella for his right to die. His appeal was unheard and, eventually, the right-to-death activist Marco Cappato accompanied Fabiani to a Swiss clinic, where the latter took his own life by self-administration of lethal pentobarbital sodium on 27 February 2017. Cappato was later prosecuted for assistance to suicide. In October 2018, the Italian Constitutional Court urged the Parliament to legislate on the matter, arguing that the current legal framework concerning the end of life deprived specific situations of adequate protection. After one year of political inertia, the Court ruled on the absence of criminal liability.

This example clearly shows how troubling a normative void on such an important matter as the possibility to get, in certain specific conditions, assistance for suicide may be. First, travelling to Switzerland cannot be the solution for several, obvious reasons, among which the simple fact that not everyone can afford the expensive trip. Second, the decision of whether one has or has not a right to death should not be left to a few competent judges, but should be a matter of public and informed debate. Ideally, this should concern not only cases of extreme and irremediable suffering and pain like the one mentioned earlier, but also different cases in which suicide may be considered as an option. In 2018, the Australian scientist David Goodall ended his own life via physician-assisted suicide at the age of 104. Goodall, a supporter of the legalization of voluntary euthanasia, was not ill but considered his life as unsatisfactory in almost every respect. A month before his death, he had fallen in his apartment and was not found for two days. Like Fabiani, Goodall had to travel to Switzerland, since the Australian legislation did not permit assisted suicide. Sometime before his death, he told broadcaster ABC: "My feeling is that an old person like myself should have full citizenship rights including the right of assisted suicide."[4]

Assisted suicide and, more generally, suicide still remains a very delicate topic. In certain cultures, suicide is taboo, and even in those cultures where it is not, it is often considered as an uncomfortable subject of conversation. Yet, as Schopenhauer reminds us, we all know someone (a relative, a friend, or an acquaintance) who has voluntarily departed from the world. This unwillingness to openly discuss the topic of suicide may have psychological reasons (the human, all too human fear of death), may be a remnant of the social stigma historically associated with voluntary death, or may be simply caused by ignorance. Be as it may, ignoring the "problem"—as the politicians, who are afraid of losing votes, often do—does not make it go away. With this book I hope to have contributed in some modest way to a better understanding of the varieties of arguments that can be put forward in favour of or against suicide.

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Footnotes

1 See https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russian-man-shot-in-quarrel-over-immanuel-kant-s-philosophy-8820327.html (accessed 24 April 2020).

2 In this sense, it may be argued that murder, like suicide, is an act that differs from all the other morally relevant acts.

3 Nietzsche's defence of life-affirming values should not be understood as contradicting his defence of voluntary death. Indeed, as mentioned in Chap. 4 of this book (Sect. 4.2), Nietzsche conceives of suicide not as a negation but as an affirmation of life.

4 See https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/apr/30/david-goodall-australia-oldest-scientist-to-end-own-life-in-switzerland (accessed 24 April 2020).

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1 Note: Page numbers followed by ‘n’ refer to notes.